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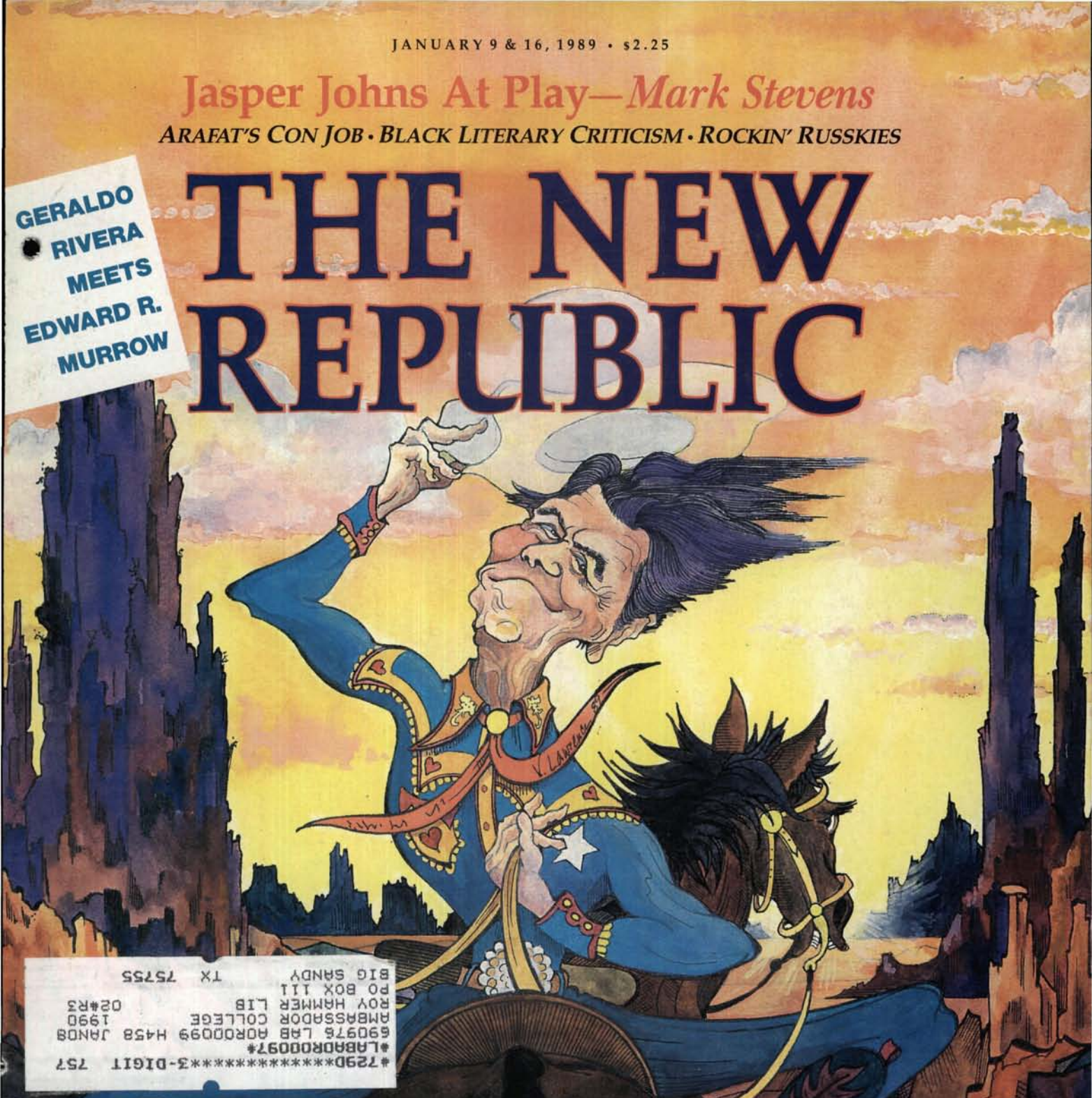

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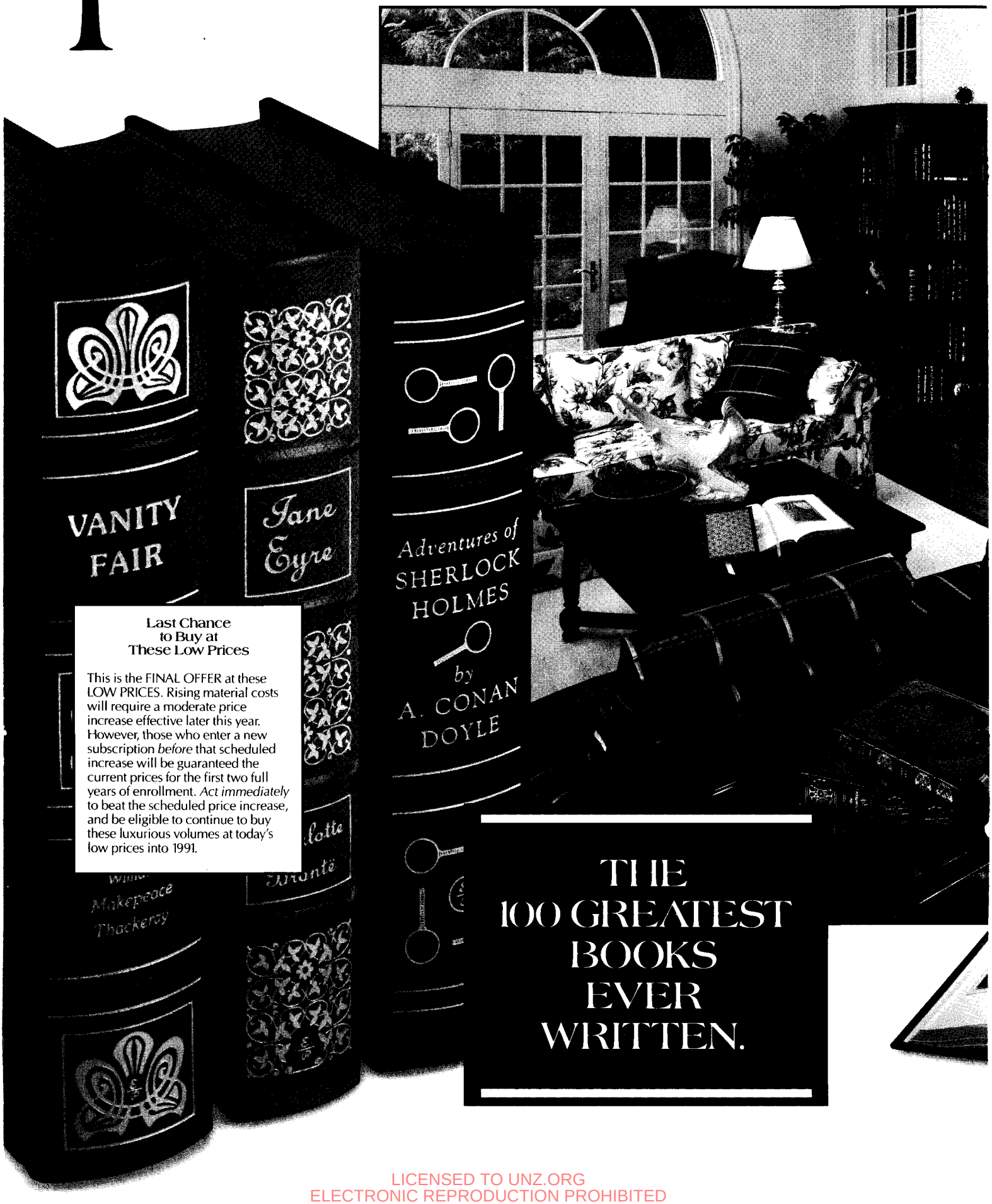

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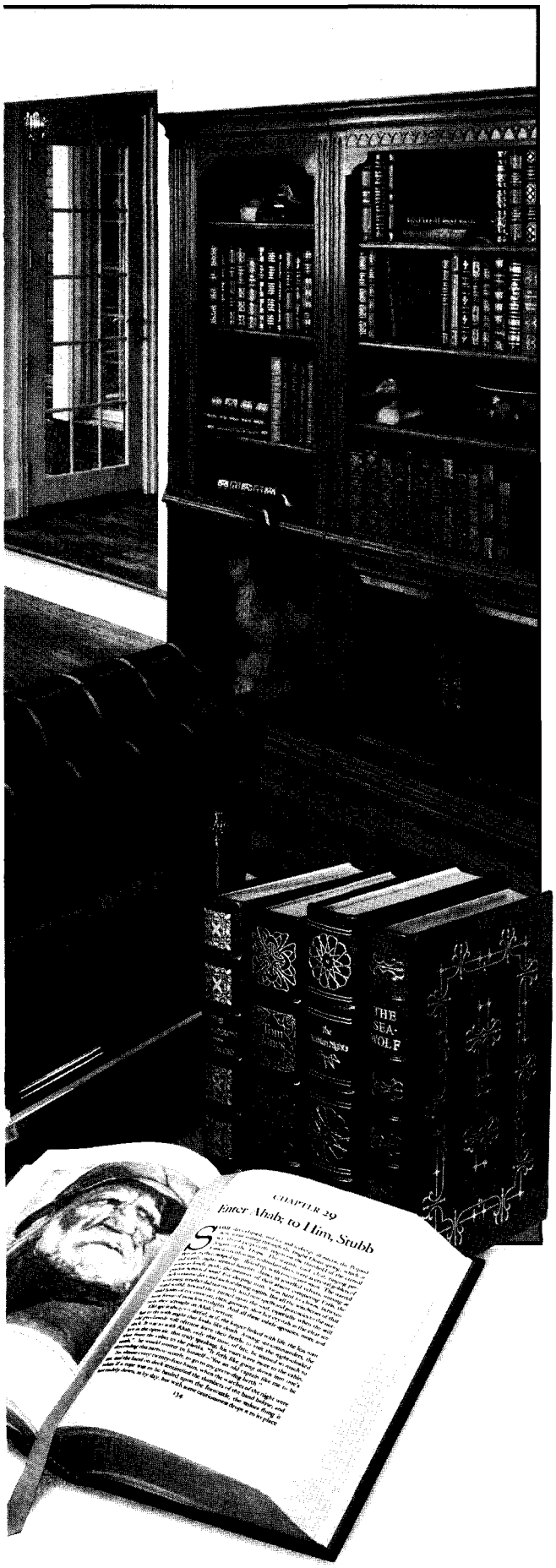

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FROM WASHINGTON

LEGACY? WHAT LEGACY?

Editor's note: this column was written by Robert Wright.

About 35 years ago, TRB described Dwight Eisenhower as a "national sedative." This metaphor came to embody the standard liberal appraisal of Ike: he had taken a nation shaken by war, Red Hunts, and other traumas, and soothed its nerves; but in the process he had left it numb to pressing problems (poverty, for example) that would grow disastrously. Ronald Reagan's presidency has had some sedative effects, too, but a better metaphor for his administration is "national anabolic steroid." He inherited a country subdued by stagflation and frightened by Vietnam, and left it economically and militarily virile. Unfortunately, steroids, like sedatives, have side effects, and already our national testicles are starting to shrink: not only are the Reagan budget deficits beginning to emasculate the Pentagon—they are also undermining long-term economic health, which, as Eisenhower stressed, is the foundation of national security.

This, of course, is already part of the standard liberal appraisal of Reagan, and though I subscribe to it, I won't here defend it. That would mean getting involved in the Reagan legacy debate, which in turn would mean accepting the idea that Reagan *has* a legacy, which is absurd. The term "Reagan legacy" implies that the consequences of this administration's actions can meaningfully be attributed to Reagan; that within his brain have resided coherent policy strategies that have succeeded (or failed) by virtue of their correspondence to (or inconsistency with) the real world. Well, even many conservatives will admit these days that "coherent" and "real world" are not terms that spring immediately to mind when they think of Ronald Reagan's brain. And if you sit them down and buy them a beer, they'll often go further, and admit that Ronald Reagan is responsible for the state of the nation in roughly the sense that Mr. Magoo is responsible for the state of his environment.

Still, the next day these same conservatives will be busily defending the "Reagan legacy" with a straight face. My favorite Reagan legacy defense is the idea that his foreign policy brought the Soviets to heel. Reagan, we are told, showed in Grenada and Libya that he was willing to see tens of Americans die for American ideals, and he showed in Afghanistan and Nicaragua that he was willing to pay tens of thousands of foreigners to die for them. The Soviet Union finally realized it couldn't afford to match us man for man (or missile for missile). Gorbachev's speech at the United Nations, then, was an admission that Reagan had taught him a lesson.

For the sake of argument, let's grant the conservative case (which does have *some* merit) that American assertiveness really did reshape Soviet foreign policy. Shouldn't we then give Reagan credit for holding the line against communism, for steadfastly bringing to fruition the policy of "containment" first laid out by George Kennan nearly a half century ago?

Don't be silly. Ronald Reagan doesn't know George Kennan from George Kennedy (whom he probably gets mixed up with John Kennedy). At the beginning of his administration, Reagan knew exactly one thing about the Soviet Union: it was the "evil empire," the bad guys. And you fight bad guys at every step. What rendered Reagan suddenly conciliatory in mid-administration wasn't any dramatic change in Soviet behavior; the mystical revelation that visited him at Reykjavik—that suddenly we could trust the Soviets to destroy their nuclear arsenal and not keep a single warhead in secret storage—came long before they began withdrawing from Afghanistan or talking plausibly about a less offensive military posture. What changed Reagan's tune, rather, was the cue he's always responded to: applause. Mikhail Gorbachev had been winning global acclaim by talking peace. Reagan wanted some of the action. It's that simple.

In economic policy, the idea of a Reagan legacy is even more ridiculous. Again, let's hypothetically concede the conservative premise: that the economy is sound, that the budget deficit won't come back to haunt us. There remains one problem with any defense of "Reaganomics." The term itself implies that (*a*) the administration steered the economy to its present state with a well-thought-out policy; and (*b*) Reagan had a clue as to what that policy was. Granted, there *was* a policy, originally: supply-side economics. What's more, it was simple enough for Reagan to understand (a clear warning sign, in retrospect). Tax cuts were going to make people work so hard that incomes would grow briskly and the tax coffers would fill up. Obviously, the present deficit is a king-size refutation of this scenario. What actually happened is that Reagan's tax cuts served as a fiscal stimulus, which, when combined with tight monetary policy, yielded low inflation and high growth (though only after years of high unemployment, which lastingly exacerbated inner-city poverty). In short, as many have noted, the Reagan economic boom was due to an old-fashioned Keynesian shot in the arm. And if you think that was part of Reagan's strategy, try mentioning J. Maynard Keynes to him. Chances are he'll start reminiscing about what a great show "Dobie Gillis" was.

Conservatives have lately been dwelling on Eisenhower-Reagan comparisons. Remember, they say, the liberal intelligentsia considered Eisenhower a simpleton when he left office, but he's since been rehabilitated: turns out he was a smart guy. Like Reagan, he wasn't always on top of policy details, or eloquent at press conferences. But he got the job done. Maybe future historians will similarly uncover Reagan's genius.

Fat chance. Eisenhower's press conference transcripts read like Supreme Court rulings compared with Reagan's. And Eisenhower's personal correspondence reveals a solid grasp of the big issues and a hard, articulate intelligence. Has Reagan even written any letters that deal analytically with public policy?

True, both administrations were high-delegation, but in Eisenhower's case the president did the delegating. In Reagan's case tasks are delegated *to* him—tasks like going to the Kennedy Center.

As Professor Fred Greenstein of Princeton has demonstrated, Eisenhower clearly, and fairly precisely, set the direction of his administration. Even when he didn't initiate policies, he intelligently evaluated them. In contrast, the Reagan administration was, in its final years, an ongoing struggle among advisers for the soul of a man who was virtually brain dead. The fact that things worked out no worse than they did is either a tribute to the institutional sturdiness of the presidency or proof of the existence of God. □

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CORRESPONDENCE

THE PERILS OF LEDEEN

To the editors:

Regarding Geoffrey Kemp's review of my book, *Perilous Statecraft: An Insider's Account of the Iran-Contra Affair* ("As The World Turns," November 21): I was not, as he claims, the person who introduced Ghorbanifar to the White House. That task was performed by representatives of the government of Israel. Second, my book does not "trash" North, McFarlane, Poindexter, Secord, et al.; I did my best to try to understand and explain why they behaved as they did. In the case of McFarlane, my affection and esteem for him are manifest. I have done my best to describe his psychological crisis in the summer and fall of 1985. Kemp challenges this account (he apparently thinks the subject itself should be reserved to psychoanalysts and ignored by historians) and implies that I didn't discuss Iran-*contra* with my former boss after the event. I spoke several times with McFarlane after the hearings were over—and could have proved it if Kemp had been professional enough to check—but in any event I had no need to discuss this subject with McFarlane, for I saw the evidence with my own eyes, as did McFarlane's friends and associates of the time, and the journalists who covered the NSC.

To round out the factual mistakes: my lawyer, Jim Woolsey, did not suggest I write the book (the suggestion came from Larry King). So far as I know, I was the only American official in the Lebanese war zone in June 1982, at a time when all American officials were forbidden to go there, and I traveled alone. And I was indeed the only American "in the room" with the Israelis and Iranians for the first several months of the Iran initiative. It was easy to check these facts, but Kemp, unfortunately, didn't bother. It might give your readers some pause about the reliability of his judgment in other areas as well.

MICHAEL A. LEDEEN
Washington, D.C.

Geoffrey Kemp replies:

I don't doubt Mr. Ledeen's affection for Robert McFarlane; I have trouble with his way of showing it. His letter differs from his book as to the timing of McFarlane's "crisis." In discussing McFarlane's suicide attempt in February 1987, the book says, "The tragedy had already begun in the fall of 1985." Now Ledeen tells us the crisis began that summer. This discrepancy is important. When Ledeen met with McFarlane in July 1985 to discuss the Ghorbanifar connection, McFarlane's instructions were, in Ledeen's words, "as always, quite precise and prudent." Not exactly crisis behavior.

I wrote that Ledeen "brought Ghorbanifar to the attention of the White House." He did. Israeli officials also told the White House about Ghorbanifar, but Ledeen himself writes, "I was the proper channel." It was he who was authorized to meet with Ghorbanifar in the summer of 1985 and report back to the White House.

I stand by my view that Ledeen's lawyer urged him to do the book, King's role notwithstanding. I remain intrigued by his solo trip to the "Lebanese war zone." Was he instructed to go by Haig? There is no word of his mission in Haig's book, *Caveat*; and no one I've talked to recalls a Ledeen Report on his "observations." If there is one, he might have mentioned it in the book.

Ledeen now says he was "the only American in the room with the Israelis and the Iranians for the first several months of the Iran initiative." Fine, but he's refining his position again. He originally said he was "the only American present during the top-secret talks with Khomeini's regime."

As for journalistic ethics, it would have been highly unprofessional of me to have consulted Ledeen. For an article about his escapades, yes. But reviewers have obligations to the books they review, not to the people who wrote them.

FRANKLY SPEAKING

To the editors:

In "Incompetent Ideology" (December 5) Robert Kuttner has not only rephrased some opinions of mine quoted in the *Boston Globe* but has also extrapolated from them, all without speaking with me. That has led to several major errors. He attributes to me the observation "that ACLU-type liberals would have the Democratic Party fall on its sword." I thought Bush's attack on the ACLU was

continued on page 40

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THE NEW REPUBLIC
JANUARY 9 & 16, 1989

THE ARAFAT SHUFFLE

Forgive us for keeping our distance from the present Middle East festivities. We just happen not to believe that the "substantive dialogue" sanctioned by George Shultz between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the United States is likely to transform the situation on the ground quite as much as most of our media colleagues seem to think. But then it's a rare development that actually turns out to be as good as some people hope. Fortunately, it's an equally rare turn of events that proves as bad as some people fear.

In the end, all that Yasir Arafat was asked to do was read George Shultz's lips, and, after several failed tries, he succeeded. Having mumbled the required incantation—and only in the informal setting of a press conference, at that—Arafat is now free to pursue the rather more equivocal diplomacy that has been his trademark for years; rest assured that his little gesture was offered to the United States on a one-time basis only. In his travels since Stockholm and Geneva, Arafat has shown that he is not interested in talking to, or eliciting anything in particular from, the Israelis. At one stop, he referred (with automatic pistol in hand) to their freely elected government as a "military junta," a phrase contrived to annul the very legitimacy he had only days before been cajoled into conceding. His next stop was Vienna, where he paid homage to his great patron, President Kurt Waldheim—another unmistakable sign of contempt for the Jewish sensibility. (The Austrians actually had the temerity to offer their capital, with all of its ugly Nazi resonances, past and present, as the site for an international peace conference on the Middle East.)

None of this should be surprising; these gaucheries are Arafat's deepest convictions at work. In fact, we might have found Arafat's post-"breakthrough" performance acceptable, in its characteristically indecent way, if it had been paired with some truth-telling to the Palestinian and Arab masses about the painful compromises without which no peace is conceivable. (He might admit, for example, that any plausible settlement with Israel will mean that much of Palestine is irretrievably lost.) It doesn't take more than a cursory look at the Levant press, however, to understand how meagerly reality has penetrated the PLO mentality. Indeed, the expectations this week seem, if anything, headier than ever. Arafat's latest precondition for even a preliminary step toward peace—an international conference—is now Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories in favor of United Nations forces.

Arafat's Geneva concessions had barely been uttered before the Palestinian leadership began busily whittling away at them. At least one member of the PLO executive committee has deemed them Arafat's "personal opinion . . . incompatible with the resolutions of the latest Palestine National Council meeting" in Algiers. And Arafat's second in command has already instructed President Reagan—to whom, remember, the PLO ultimately owes its diplomatic breakthrough—in the practical limits on the Palestinian renunciation of terrorism. The Palestinians seem to be under the impression that Arafat's single,

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painstakingly narrow utterance was the entire price for U.S. recognition—that our government will ask for no further concessions before weighing in heavily for a sovereign Palestinian state.

In retrospect, Henry Kissinger's 1975 pledge that the United States wouldn't deal with the PLO until certain textual conditions were met was, however well intended, probably ill-advised. It was a mistake to cast these stipulations in terms of words rather then deeds. Indeed, the main virtue of the Kissinger formula was as an index of the resilience of the irredentist vision among the Palestinians: it took Arafat *13 years* merely to *utter* the magic words. Still, it was inevitable that he would do so. In the end, there was no reason that he shouldn't; if he didn't play his American card, he came to realize, he'd spend the rest of his days shuttling between countries whose rulers have no sway over Israel (countries like Sweden, which managed to remain neutral through World War II and is now a relentless partisan of the PLO but nonetheless insists on its moral authority with the Jews). Arafat has now rescued himself from this dour fate.

WHAT, EXACTLY, has Washington won by playing its Palestinian card? It did not get a single American hostage out of Beirut, though U.S. intelligence is convinced that several hostages there are under the control of PLO operatives. In fact, it didn't even extract PLO acquiescence in the extradition of a Palestinian terrorist held in Greece. One wonders why an administration that has made so much of its abhorrence of terrorism settled for fudged verbal concessions when concrete concessions were clearly available.

The eventual fallout from the mixed message on terrorism is, however, the least of the burdens the Shultz demarche has bequeathed to his successors. The really onerous burden is that, in the eyes of the Palestinians, the United States has now formally and explicitly assumed the function of deus ex machina. Washington may demur, insisting this is not the case; certainly it was not Shultz's intention, and it almost as certainly was not Baker's. But these protests will fall on deaf ears in the Middle East; they will seem only coy—especially in view of the significance Arafat plainly ascribes to what the United States refers to only as a dialogue. He has told his people that the new diplomatic contact is tantamount to the endorsement of a Palestinian state. Indeed, he has set various public deadlines for the actual achievement of (not to be confused with the declaration of) a state. His latest target date is two years; he might just as well have said two weeks. There has been, Arafat believes, a long struggle between Jews and Arabs for the mind of America, and he considers the tide to have now turned. With the help of a masterful vagueness as to the scale of his and his organization's political and territorial ambitions, Arafat some time ago succeeded in conning Europe; he is now convinced that he has conned America, too.

In the Palestinian reading of history this is the supreme accomplishment. The received legend among the Arabs about the creation of Israel is that Britain gave the Zionists a state. It was as simple as that: there was never a Jewish effort at consolidating a nation, never a struggle against the elements or against the British, or even against the Arabs. Israel was just the most recent legacy of colonialism in the region. Then, according to Arafat, the United States took over the care and feeding of what he calls the West's "naughty baby." But now that has changed. It is at last morning for the PLO.

It may seem grandly paradoxical that such an assertively anti-American, anti-imperialist movement should find itself so relishing the attentions of the American imperialists. But of course it makes sense. It is the American initiative that has consolidated the momentum toward Arafat in the Palestinian world. One consequence is that Jordan, with which we have abiding links, has for now been muscled out of the picture completely. The local Palestinians, who through the *intifada* had by themselves turned a new page in the sad history of their people and finally begun to articulate, if gropingly and fearfully, their own interests and needs, have once again been thrust fully into Arafat's vortex. This is not a change in the balance of Arab power that bodes well for negotiations or for peace.

The United States is bound to disappoint those who suddenly are sure we will produce the Palestinian state of their desire. First of all, Washington is in no position to deliver that even if it wanted to—which, at last reading, it didn't. Dependent though Israel may be, it still has resources—military, scientific, strategic, and, yes, moral—that matter. It cannot be pushed around without limit. Nor can it be abandoned; even some of those friendliest to the cause of Palestine in the abstract will not, in the end, want to go that far. Besides, there is a very small likelihood that Arafat has been transformed into a pragmatic statesman, disdainful of illusions and reconciled to the world of the possible. Having garnered the blandishments of the great power, why should he give up the wily ways of the bazaar, which won him those blandishments?

AT THE General Assembly in Geneva, Arafat spoke of peace 68 times. Can anybody doubt that what he means by peace is victory? Dan Williams, reporting in the *Los Angeles Times*, named the stakes without sentimentality: "Both sides view the U.S. decision as a turning point in the long battle between Israel and the Palestinians over who rules the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea." Precisely: there is a long list of Palestinian grievances that would not be assuaged by a sovereign state in the West Bank and Gaza. These grievances—Jerusalem, the right of return, the right of secession—awaiting their turn seriatim, would come forth in violent protest, often in terror. Israelis would be pressed to relinquish yet another piece of territory, to yield on some security guarantee. They would also be pressed from outside, first of all by Europeans, and then by the whole self-righteous chorus at the United Nations, minus perhaps the United States, with Austra-

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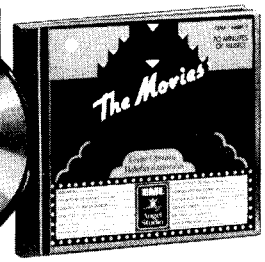

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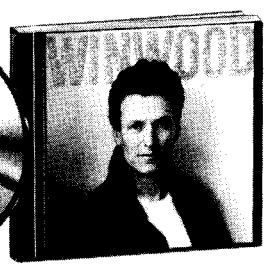

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lia, Canada, and Costa Rica abstaining.

If this happens, of course, Israel will be reluctant, and this reluctance Peter Jennings, Anthony Lewis, and others will characterize as intransigence. Don't the Israelis understand, they will ask, that meeting this last demand will finally bring them peace? But peace cannot be defined only as that condition that appeases the enraged. This is why there is no power on earth that will persuade the Israelis to open themselves to the death of a thousand cuts, the gradual cession of power and authority that would further diminish their already slender margin of security in a region rife with hostile Arabs. And they are right to ask why the world's good spirits expect from them nothing less than full satisfaction for Palestinian aspirations but are silent when the Estonians and Latvians and Lithuanians, historic peoples with real and ancient histories (to say nothing of the Kurds and the Berbers among the Arabs), are fated to live out national destinies in subservience to others.

BUT THIS QUESTION is not enough. Right though the Israelis are to ask it, neither Israel's remaining friends nor the character of its own body politic will permit it to continue ruling the Palestinians so unheedful of their dignity and of their emerging nationhood. The Israelis have to ask themselves how Arafat and the PLO, eclipsed and ignored just a year ago, are now once again at the center of Arab politics.

The proximate reason is the uprising in the territories, which Arafat skillfully rode into the spotlight. The great Israeli mistake was in never giving the Palestinians an alternative to this form of expression. During the last eight years the Israelis had in power in Washington the greatest concentration of friends ever. Each of the secretaries was sympathetic, Alexander Haig by initial conviction, George Shultz by the deeper experience of betrayal after having trusted various Arab states and other Arab interlocutors. The Israelis took advantage of this friendship and took it for granted. They thought it would last forever, that it required no reciprocal obligations. They blithely ignored Washington's oft-stated concerns about the Palestinians. They built Jewish settlements in the occupied territories according to God's holy ordinance, leaving everyone hostage to a few thousand fanatics. These were exactly the years when the Israelis should have put forward truly conciliatory and ingenuous initiatives toward the Palestinians and toward Jordan. If reasonable, they would surely have won the support of the United States, and the dire predicament in which Israel now finds itself might never have been. Arafat might now, in fact, be history.

He isn't. And it will not do much longer, in response to the *intifada* and in response to Arafat's new ascendancy—in response, in fact, to nearly everything—for the Israelis to keep sending Benjamin Netanyahu onto "Nightline." The Israelis have got to get serious, even if it means straining their precarious governing coalition. But even a serious offer with serious inducements to the Palestinians will have a more difficult career after Washington's opening to Arafat.

It will not be long before Messrs. Bush and Baker will find out that this opening, which has created the wildest expectations, is a trap; that Arafat doesn't mean the business of peace, and that in the end America will be seen as having failed once again in the Middle East. If the early reports are correct—and Bush indeed nudged Shultz in the direction of Arafat—it will not be the first time that a president lived to regret his most clever maneuvers.

NOTEBOOK

□ INSTANT REPLAY: The nation's banks seem to be suffering from a case of amnesia. In 1987 U.S. commercial banks posted their least profitable year since the Depression, largely because they had to set aside reserves to cover potential losses from Third World loans. Last year, though, profits were running at record levels. One reason is because commercial banks have found a new black hole for their customers' money: leveraged buyouts. Banks now usually provide 60 percent or more of the purchase price of an LBO. The $25 billion purchase of RJR Nabisco, for example, was financed by $14.5 billion in bank loans. The RJR loans alone are roughly equivalent to 70 percent of the increase in commercial and industrial lending in America last year. Banks like LBO loans for their attractive financial terms and for the big "commitment" fees they get each time they sign on to a deal. But because companies that have been bought out usually carry mountains of debt, even the slightest upward nudge in interest rates can bring on bankruptcy. Sound familiar?

□ 100,000 POINTS OF LIGHT: Cynics may scoff at George Bush's plan to revive the spirit of voluntarism in this country, but it's clear that the president-elect means business. Already some 200 individuals and corporations have provided the Bush inaugural committee with interest-free loans totaling $20 million. And who knows how much more will flow in now that inaugural committee officials have graciously waived the $100,000 floor on contributions? Probably enough to enable them to make the Bush inauguration the most expensive in history. No doubt the inauguration's backers will also help energize the "enormous awakening" of voluntarism that Bush called for at Jack Kemp's installation as secretary of housing and urban development—and for the same selfless reasons that motivate them now.

□ DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS: TNR inadvertently misidentified Leonel Gonzalez, a top leader of the FMLN, the Salvadoran Communist guerrilla front, as Leonel Gomez. ("Domino's Delivery," December 26, 1988.) Leonel Gomez is, in fact, an exiled Salvadoran writer living in the United States, and a democrat. We regret the error.

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□ IF THE SHIRT FITS:

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—same issue, page 31

(no thanks to Douglas Weatherford, Dallas, Texas)

Gorbo, get on down.

RED SUEDE SHOES

GET READY, rock 'n' roll fans. Here comes Boris Grebenshchikov. Sometime in January, CBS Records will release an English-language album recorded by Grebenshchikov, the leader of Aquarium, one of the U.S.S.R.'s top rock groups. With a little backup help from performers like Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders and Annie Lennox of Eurythmics, Grebenshchikov—or Grebenshikov, to use CBS's more palatable spelling—will be promoted as the first major Soviet recording artist to break into the Western market.

After three decades of vituperative anti-rock rhetoric—former Soviet Foreign Minister Shepilov once decried rock as an "explosion of the basest instincts and sexual urges"—a Soviet leader has allied himself with the forces of rock 'n' roll. The decisive moment came in March 1987, when Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife, Raisa, personally received Yoko Ono, who was then peddling her message of world peace. Raisa assured the widow of the former Beatle that she and her husband were "fans" of John Lennon's music, quoting several lines from the song "Woman" as evidence. Now Gorbachev has gone beyond merely embracing rockers. Rock 'n' roll is being pressed into service as a global emissary, a shining example of *glasnost* for all the world to see.

This isn't the first time that the Soviet government has exploited rock 'n' roll. Ever since 1966, when the Ministry of Culture equipped the first Vocal Instrumental Ensembles (official euphemisms for rock bands) with electric guitars, the powers that be have tried to hitch Russian rockers to the plow of state policy. But traditionally the bands have had names like "The Happy Guys" and "The Singing Guitars" and have mostly sung the praises of cosmonauts and steel production. Deviance was never part of the program. More than a decade after Jimi Hendrix and The Who ended their sets at the 1968 Monterey Pop Festival by smashing their equipment, Soviet judges at a rock "festival" in Tbilisi walked off the stage when Aquarium's guitarist, bassoonist, and cellist (you heard right) began gesturing at one another with their instruments. "Why did you bring those faggots here?" asked one of the judges.

Even today Soviet heavy metal bands have been known to smile and bow after each number (as opposed to, say, biting the heads off live animals, in the manner of Black Sabbath's Ozzy Osborne), but under Gorbachev their lyrics have loosened up, and rock music has come to be seen as more than just a necessary evil. Following the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, rock bands were pressed into service at the cleanup site. The Estonian band Vitamin supplemented the musical diet of work crews with disaster-area concerts that began at 8 a.m. After its Chernobyl gig, Vitamin, in a moment of black humor, changed its name to Respirator and added three new songs to its repertoire: "Accident," "Chernobyl Rock," and "Chernobyl 86."

Yet while rock was increasingly tolerated as a tool to keep the natives from getting too restless, it was still regarded as the U.S.S.R.'s not-so-secret shame. As recently as the mid-1980s, Soviet officials had made it all but impossible for rock groups to play in the West. No more. A few months ago, Victor Schulman, an émigré promoter who has worked with Gosconcert for two decades, observed: "Previously, Gosconcert was only interested in sending the Bolshoi Ballet and the Red Army Choir abroad. *Perestroika* changed that. People in the Soviet Mission, people in the Soviet Embassy, people at Gosconcert and in the Ministry of Culture are suddenly interested in promoting rock and pop music."

In the summer of 1987, MTV, the cable television rock video station, picked up on Moscow's new beat. When company producers expressed interest in filming a documentary on the Soviet rock scene, it took less than three weeks to make all the arrangements. The Soviets even opened the doors to Leningrad's Neva Stars discotheque for a peek at the weekly heavy metal night. MTV film crews returned to New York with footage of Soviet punks and *metalisti*, draped in leather and chains, dancing to the cacophony of Judas Priest, Motley Crüe, and Twisted Sister.

LATELY Gosconcert has intensified its efforts to market Soviet rock music abroad. Bands that two years ago were underground are touring countries like Sweden, Japan, and West Germany under the auspices of Gosconcert. One need only have heard the Leningrad band Televizor to realize that Mother Russia is letting her hair down. Televizor, banned in 1986 for its song "Get Out of Control," a paean to anarchy, recently appeared in Western Europe. Lead singer Mikhail Barzikhan, a sinewy Russian with close-cropped hair, performed his underground hit "My Father Was a Fascist," as well as "Get Out of Control." Taking the stage before his Western audience, Barzikhan offered the new sounds of Gorbachev's Russia:

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Looking up at the terrorists above,
I say, "Get out of control!
Tear down these walls!
Sing what you want!
Not what you're told!
Get out of control!
You can be free!"

This message, carefully channeled and moderately interpreted, amounts to a restatement of *glasnost*. And other rock stars are unambiguously supporters of the Gorbachev agenda. For the past two years, Soviet pop superstar Alla Pugachova has preached the gospel of *glasnost* while strutting her stuff in Western Europe, the Far East, and, most recently, North America. In August 1987, Pugachova proclaimed to 30,000 West German fans in Munich: "Let *perestroika* work around the world!" (That must have caused some head-scratching among the audience.) In an interview with the *Christian Science Monitor*, Pugachova spoke of her common-law marriage to Soviet foreign policy: "By seeing me perform, I hope that people will change their way of thinking about the Soviet people. That they will see that we are not just Russian bears."

YES, BUT will they buy your records? Soviet song writers, overloaded with literary ambition, place more emphasis on the content of their lyrics than on the quality of their music. And they don't seem to have stumbled onto the infallible Western formula for commercial success: appeal to (in Shepilov's words) "the basest instincts and sexual urges." Here is one of Mikhail Barzikhan's poetic offerings:

At the piano it's just me and the snow,
The black and white keys wait for spring to come,
Even if there's not enough paint in this dream,
I still haven't forgotten colorful dreams.

"Push, Push in the Bush" it's not. And not only is sex largely ignored by Soviet musicians; the favorite four-letter word of Western rock and pop bands, "love," rarely appears in Soviet lyrics—either officially or underground.

What then do Soviet rockers sing about? In the tradition of the great Russian poets, they take on the big issues—the meaning of existence, the futility of life. Here's one of Aquarium's numbers:

I wake up and I'm afraid to open my eyes
I ask, "Who's there?"
They answer but somehow incoherent
All clocks are running sideways
It's new time

Trumpets! Here come the trumpets
Who calls us?
I moved to a new house
But still there's no place for me there
I say, "no" but it's just reflex
Looks like it's too late, too late

If that sounds like Pink Floyd on bad acid, don't worry. On the lighter side, Soviet rockers also examine the kinks in communism. The biggest unofficial hit of 1986 was a song by the Moscow band Zvuki Mu about the Soviet press. It contained the lyrics:

I often sit in sadness.
I can cry without tears.
I just make my eyes empty.
And I say "I'm for it"
To every question
But in the morning
On the way past the newsstand
I often want what I don't have.
I was taught to dream
By the fresh print of newspapers
By the Soviet press.

Sasha Lipninsky, bass guitarist for Zvuki Mu, has little confidence in the current Soviet rock 'n' roll offensive. "The interest of the West will last for a year, maybe two years," Lipninsky recently said in an interview with the *New York Times*. "I am not optimistic about our *perestroika*, and when the West realizes that these changes have slowed down, they will lose interest in Soviet rock."

Even if *perestroika* forges ahead at home, Soviet rock 'n' roll may well founder abroad. Increasing exposure in the West will gradually bleed Soviet rock bands of their novelty, and that, more than anything else, is what has kept them alive in the Western media.

Grebenshchikov is no stranger to Western ways. He made a point of buttonholing Western visitors in the U.S.S.R. and presenting them with cassettes of his music. Now he'll have to hope that his p.r. savvy, along with his English lessons and the help of record producer David Stewart (of Eurythmics fame), will enable him to realize his crossover dreams. Still, don't rush out to Tower Records. That might suit Gorbachev's purposes, but as one U.S. reviewer in *High Fidelity* recently said about an anthology of four Leningrad bands, including Aquarium: "Boy, is this music bad."

TIMOTHY W. RYBACK

Timothy W. Ryback is a lecturer at Harvard University. His book *Rock around the Bloc* will be published this year by Oxford University Press.

Ollie North's farewell performance.

CASE CLOSED

"It's time to recognize that the case against Ollie North and others in the Iran-*contra* affair has been political from the start," says the *Wall Street Journal*. Conservative columnists such as George Will, Patrick Buchanan, Robert Novak, and James J. Kilpatrick agree. They seem to think that the upcoming trial of Lt. Col. North represents "the

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criminalization of a policy dispute" between Congress and the president. They have even managed to persuade many people (including the president, apparently) that the central charge against North and his alleged co-conspirators is violation of the Boland amendment, which prohibited certain forms of government aid to the *contras* (and which, we are reminded, is not a criminal statute). The current record for this sort of distortion is held by George Carver of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. On the "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" he recently said that the 23-count indictment of North et al. doesn't allege the violation of a single criminal statute—that it "isn't a criminal charge" but rather is "a bill of attainder."

A CAREFUL reading of the indictment leaves one amazed that so many people could get the story so wrong. At its core, *United States* v. *North* is an embezzlement case. The grand jury, acting on evidence assembled by Lawrence Walsh, a distinguished Republican attorney and former president of the American Bar Association, alleges that North violated eight separate criminal statutes. Central among them is Section 641 of the U.S. criminal code, which makes it a felony punishable by ten years' imprisonment for any person knowingly and willfully to "embezzle, steal, or convert to his use or the use of another" any money belonging to the United States.

The money in question is surely the greatest amount ever alleged to have been embezzled from the United States in a single criminal conspiracy. The prosecutor charges that over $30 million was obtained from the sale of arms to Iran, and that less than half of that found its way into the U.S. Treasury—which is where all of it, the prosecution will doubtless argue, belonged. After all, proceeds from the sale of equipment owned by the United States are solely the property of the United States.

Most of the $30 million went into secret Swiss bank accounts controlled by North and co-defendant Richard Secord, an intermediary in the arms deal. As far as the indictment's embezzlement count is concerned, it doesn't matter whether the money went from there to the *contras*, or to Secord and Albert Hakim (another intermediary), or for that matter to the United Way or Mother Teresa. Since the money did not belong to the defendants, they were not free to use it for anything other than the authorized Iranian arms sale.

So questions about the diversion of funds to the *contras*, and about whether North, Secord, and others personally profited from the arms sale—questions that much concerned the Iran-*contra* committee—are irrelevant to the central charges against the defendants. But that is not to say that questions of personal corruption won't come up at the trial. One count charges that Secord and Hakim set up a secret Swiss account of $200,000 intended to encourage North to stay on the National Security Council staff so that Hakim and Secord "would continue to receive opportunities for substantial revenues and profits in connection with lucrative activities referred to them by North and facilitated by him in his official capacity . . ." Another count charges that North converted to his own personal use "at least" $4,300 of traveler's checks from *contra* leader Adolfo Calero.

The grand jury has also charged North with making "false, fraudulent, and fictitious" statements to the U.S. attorney general in the course of an official inquiry, and with "concealing, removing, mutilating, obliterating, falsifying, and destroying official documents." According to the indictment, there was also deception of the CIA and the Defense Department well before the inquiry began. The indictment states, for example:

> In early 1986, the defendants Oliver L. North and Richard V. Secord agreed to retain for the Enterprise a substantial part of the $10 million [Iranian] payment for the first shipment of TOW missiles by having the defendant Secord transmit to the United States through the CIA substantially less than was paid for those missiles on behalf of the Iranians. In furtherance of this plan, the defendant North told an official of the CIA that a price of $6,000 per TOW missile was too high and should be reduced, without revealing that the Iranian representative had already offered to pay $10,000 per missile.

When all was said and done, the U.S. government received only $3,469 for each missile in that particular sale; North's "Enterprise" skimmed off $6 million of the $10 million.

The Boland amendment makes only a cameo appearance in the extensive indictment—in one paragraph of one of the 23 counts. The paragraph charges a conspiracy to conduct a "secret war" in a way "calculated to defeat legal restrictions governing the conduct of military and covert action activities and congressional control of appropriations, and to conceal these activities from legitimate congressional oversight." Here and only here does it matter whether Oliver North diverted money to the *contras*. And nowhere has Walsh or the grand jury even remotely suggested that mere "policy disagreements" with Congress are criminal. In fact, in a recent brief Walsh stated that he "has explicitly refrained from asserting even that open defiance of enacted congressional restrictions on foreign military ventures would be criminal."

THE HEART of the prosecution's case in *United States* v. *North* is this: weapons and other properties belonging to the United States, and paid for by its taxpayers, were sold to foreigners, and much of the proceeds were fraudulently, deceitfully, and secretly set aside in private bank accounts, rather than being given to the government. Since the beginning of the Republic, federal criminal law has prohibited government officials from secretly directing government funds to themselves or to enterprises of their choosing. Such statutes protect both against private corruption and against perversion of a fundamental principle set out in Article I of the Constitution: "No Money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law."

The Iran-*contra* affair undoubtedly raises important issues of foreign policy. But the prosecution itself is focused principally on alleged acts that are and always have been criminal. And unless the Iran-*contra* committee and the

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grand jury have gotten the elementary facts of the case wrong, these charges are going to be tough to beat.

WALTER DELLINGER

Walter Dellinger, a professor of law at Duke University, is a 1988-89 fellow at the National Humanities Center.

Ed Murrow, meet Geraldo.

BLITZED

"Responding to charges that his narcissism overwhelms his news sense, Rivera compares himself to Edward R. Murrow, an earlier journalist/celebrity." —*Newsweek*, "Trash TV," November 14, 1988

December 1940, CBS Radio:

ANNOUNCER: Live from war-torn London, it's ... Geraldo!

(*Applause*)

GERALDO: Hello, America ... This is Geraldo calling, broadcasting live from a subway air-raid shelter. I'm surrounded by innocent victims of the Nazis' bloody aerial rampage. Tonight, there are dead bodies in Trafalgar Square. The East End is a blazing inferno. And prostitutes are hawking their bodies amid the rubble. The Blitz: What's it doing to England—and English morality? That's the focus of tonight's special edition of *Geraldo!* We'll be back right after a word from our sponsor.

(*Advertisement for Lucky Strikes*)

GERALDO: Right now it's eerily quiet in London. Sometime in the next few hours, the Nazi monsters in their death planes could strike again, and if they do, we'll bring it to you live. You'll hear it all: the wail of the air-raid sirens, the incredibly loud explosions, the horrible shrieks of mothers crying out for their children. I'm begging you, Moms and Dads, make sure all the kids are safely in bed before you listen. The gruesome details are just too upsetting. If they even heard just a few seconds of the pitiful cries of a child injured by shrapnel, they wouldn't be able to sleep for days. We'll likely be featuring that—and lots more—if the Nazis, as I expect, strike later tonight.

And later in the broadcast, you'll get to hear a Nazi barbarian explain in his own words why he's bombing innocent women and children. (*Boos, angry shouts.*)

Now, let's meet our first guests, Parents of Kids Killed in the Blitz. There's Irene Stevens, wife of a British aviator. Her ten-year-old son was walking home from a friend's house when the raids began that evening. They found his body under a pile of bricks the next day. And here's Cecilia Stimson, who lives in the gritty East End. She sent her 14-year-old daughter, her only child, out to get some groceries—only to see her hit by a German bomb right before her eyes. Cecilia, let's start with you. How does it feel to see the light of your life, your own daughter, blown to bits right in front of you?

CECILIA (*sobbing*): It's awful.

GERALDO: Do you ever feel guilty, knowing that if you had kept her inside the house, she'd still be alive today, growing up into a fine young woman who, someday, would give you happy grandchildren? Does that ever bother you?

CECILIA: I think about it all the time. I feel terrible. (*Cries for a few seconds, then continues in a quaking voice.*) But the curfew hadn't started yet, and there was still some light in the sky. I thought it was safe ...

GERALDO: Well, that's a decision that will haunt you the rest of your life, Cecilia. Let's turn to our other guest, Irene Stevens. Irene, how angry do you feel towards those brutal Nazis who snuffed out the life of your young son?

IRENE: I want to kill the whole bloody lot of 'em! Why'd they 'ave to take my Cecil from me? 'E never did 'em no 'arm. I 'ope 'itler burns in 'ell! (*Audience applauds.*)

GERALDO: I know just how you feel, Irene. It's appalling what those savage Germans are doing to your great city. But the people of London don't just pay a price in health and safety—their sense of morality and ethics has been shattered, too. When we come back, we'll talk to a bisexual teenage prostitute who's made big money while London burns. Stay tuned—and, don't forget, at any moment, those dreaded Nazi bombers could strike again!

(*Advertisement for Chesterfields*)

GERALDO: Welcome back. The English are supposed to be a very proper people. The stiff upper lip, tea at 4 p.m., very reserved, and so on. Well, that's all changed since the bombings began last August. There's sin for sale in London—and, apparently, there's a lot of buyers. Our next guests are experts on the subject. There's Tony, a 16-year-old kid who sells his body to anyone who has enough money to pay. And there's Christine, who works the posh clubs and hotels in London's West End.

GERALDO: Tony, what made you do something as repulsive as selling your body to strange men for their twisted pleasures?

TONY: Me Mum's out of the house all the time, me Dad's dead, and I could use a few quid.

GERALDO: What are you, *sick*? Isn't there any other way for you to earn money beside degrading yourself like this? You're a walking tragedy, Tony. And look at Christine here, all dressed up in furs and diamonds. Christine, with so many people in London suffering, how do you manage to do so well?

CHRISTINE: A lot of men will pay good money for what I've got to offer. I see all kinds—bankers, Cabinet ministers, the cream of the crop.

GERALDO: Christine, there's something I've always wanted to know: Do you actually have sex in the middle of aerial attacks?

CHRISTINE: I dunno. Sometimes.

GERALDO: That's really disgusting and perverted. I can't believe I'm hearing this. It's time for a break, but stay with us, because when we come back, you'll get to talk with a

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genuine Nazi. And remember, those Nazi warplanes could strike at any time, so keep those kids away from the radio!

(*Advertisement for Camels*)

GERALDO: How could the Nazis inflict so much pain and misery on the citizens of London? To answer that question, we've brought together Malcolm Stanford, head of London's Civil Defense Rescue Brigade, and Hans Bittman, a captured Luftwaffe pilot. Hans, let me ask you this first: Aren't you ashamed of what you and your fellow pilots have done, killing tens of thousands of civilians?

HANS: No. I did it for the Fatherland and the glory of the Führer. (*Screams of "Shoot him! Shoot him* now!")

GERALDO: Malcolm, what do you think of what Hans did?

MALCOLM: He's a Nazi swine and I want to strangle him with my bare hands!

(*The sounds of scuffling and flying fists are heard.*)

GERALDO: Fellas, let's break it up . . . Ouch! Hey, that's my nose! . . . Well, we're just about out of time. Looks like those Nazi fighter-planes haven't arrived yet. But tune in tomorrow night, when they're almost sure to show up. Until then, this is Geraldo Rivera for CBS News. I'm outta here.

ART LEVINE

Art Levine is a Washington writer.

Conservatism's lost opportunities.

NAP-MASTER RONNIE

PRESIDENT REAGAN likes an off-color joke, but he's still pretty straight-laced when it comes to sex in movies. He and Nancy watch a lot of films—there are small theaters at both the White House and Camp David—but not many with naked bodies and R-rated sex scenes. Reagan believes the old directors handled sex better, mainly by leaving it to the imagination. One of his favorite scenes occurred in a movie by Ernst Lubitsch. Seems a couple had gotten married, gone on their honeymoon, and arrived at a hotel for their first night together. In Lubitsch's final scene at the hotel, a female hand reaches out from behind the door and hangs a "DO NOT DISTURB" sign on the knob. This is sexy stuff, tastefully done, according to Reagan.

How do I know he feels this way? Reagan told me, and that's why I'm passing it along. In the Reagan years, I had two private, off-the-record meetings with the man himself. Well, semiprivate anyway. The first was in September 1984. Along with a half-dozen other journalists, I asked Reagan questions for an hour late one afternoon over coffee in the White House's basement library. For the second, sometime in 1986, I moved upstairs for a lunch with Reagan, Donald Regan, and radio broadcaster Paul Harvey. On each occasion, Reagan was extraordinarily genial and warm, but he didn't say anything that expanded my knowledge of his presidency. All I remember is that both times he complained about unveiled sex in current movies and told the Lubitsch story. Each time it produced smiles all around. Later I noticed he'd used the same story in an on-the-record magazine interview.

REAGAN HAD things too easy. He knew he could get away with repeating an old story, and that's often what he did. In a pinch, he could save the day with a winging speech, such as his moving words at Bitburg, or perhaps just a planned quip, like the one about Walter Mondale's "youth and inexperience." As president, Reagan was breathtakingly glib. And he relied so much on mere glibness that it kept him from working hard and taking risks. Still, his presidency was successful. Six-plus years of economic growth is nothing to sneer at, deficit or no deficit, and only on Reagan's watch and because of his actions did the Soviet empire begin to contract. But his presidency would have been a lot more successful had Reagan not been so lazy—he said he'd been assured hard work wasn't fatal, but why take a chance?—and risk-averse.

What if Reagan had concerned himself with personnel? I don't mean he should have fussed over every political job in the administration, all 6,000 or so. But what about treasury secretary and White House chief of staff? Reagan swallowed without a moment's reflection the job swap that sent James Baker to Treasury and Regan to the White House. Regan lacked the political skills to be an effective chief of staff, which might have occurred to Reagan if he'd taken the time to think about it. Regan also let the president take the one big risk of his second term, the arms sale to Iran, and it was a dumb one. Baker wouldn't have allowed it. Reagan didn't pay much attention to his national security advisers either. Had he, he'd have noticed that Bud McFarlane was cracking under the pressure and that John Poindexter, a fellow who blithely lied to the press about the Grenada invasion, was singularly unsuited for the post. Reagan couldn't be bothered.

A little boning-up on issues would have spared him considerable embarrassment in public. Reading a book or two a month might have helped, though I'll admit the recent example of two politicians who are avid readers, Jimmy Carter and Gary Hart, isn't encouraging. With a better grasp of issues, Reagan wouldn't have had to slink back to the Oval Office like a wounded duck after each nationally televised press conference, what few there were. Nobody expected him to rattle off the proposed amendments to the Clean Air Act, but getting the gist of issues right would have helped. At one session with reporters early in his administration, he couldn't explain why his chosen basing mode for the MX missile had been selected. He turned to Cap Weinberger, his defense secretary, for that. This was bad. Half the reporters present could have given the correct explanation. Given his sketchy knowledge of many issues, it was small wonder that reporters took Reagan literally when he said that missiles from sub-

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marines could be called back. He meant the subs could be, but the press was poised to find flubs and wasn't about to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Reagan would have been better off if he'd never seen an opinion poll during his presidency. Poll numbers became an obsession, both for him and his aides. His popularity had to be kept up at all costs, they thought, or else he'd be powerless. But the Reagan crowd didn't want him to use his power much either. That might cause his popularity to plummet, which would mean he'd lose power—circular logic if ever I heard it. So Reagan husbanded his power and didn't take many risks. He leaves office as the most popular departing president ever. Yes, more popular than Ike. After his Iranamok slump, Reagan's rating is back to 63 percent positive in pollster Richard Wirthlin's latest survey. When he left the White House, Eisenhower's was at 59 percent. Carter's was at 34 percent, Ford's at 53 percent, Nixon's at 24 percent, Johnson's at 44 percent, Truman's at 31 percent. At the time John F. Kennedy was assassinated, a poll put his presidential popularity at 59 percent.

REAGAN PAID a price for his popularity. He took few chances and settled for less than he should have. In 1981 he proposed an across-the-board cut in marginal tax rates for individuals and more lucrative depreciation for business. Dan Rostenkowski, the Democratic chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, tried to outbid Reagan in cutting taxes. The president and his men panicked. They accepted every unwarranted tax break that Rosty had agreed to, and then some. The result, according to static revenue estimates, was $250 billion in special-interest tax preferences that weren't economically productive. The trucking industry was allowed to write off the lost value, due to deregulation, of operating licenses that had been issued by the federal government. Horse breeders got a write-off. So did the oil crowd. And so on. The alternative to outbidding Rosty was for Reagan to stick with his original bill. My guess is he'd have won handily, and we'd have gotten a fairer tax bill with less revenue loss. More risk was involved in this course, which is why Reagan didn't follow it.

After 1981 Reagan refused to spend any of his political capital on eliminating wasteful or redundant federal programs, such as the Amtrak subsidy, the Economic Development Administration, or the Small Business Administration. Attempting to kill any program can be a bloody affair, but Reagan could have survived. He didn't try. True, he proposed elimination of some programs, but he never followed through and put pressure on Congress. Nor did he lean on Congress to enact enterprise zones, one of his favorite talking points. He could have gotten them approved without too much effort, but he didn't try.

The most regrettable example of Reagan's risk averseness was his re-election campaign. By early 1984 it was clear he'd win easily. This gave him a beautiful opportunity to stump for whatever issue was dear to his heart. None was dearer than the *contras*. He didn't have to make the *contras* the centerpiece of his campaign, only mention them frequently. Maybe he couldn't have turned public opinion on its head, but at least he could have made the *contras* less unpopular in this country. By talking them up, he would have laid down a marker with Congress. Look, he'd have been able to say, I campaigned heavily for sending military aid to the *contras*. The American people know I want this, and they re-elected me. So pony up the money. Congress would have knuckled under. But Reagan wasn't willing to risk anything for the *contras*. Perhaps he would have won by less than a landslide if he had championed their cause in the campaign. Maybe he would have won only 35 or 40 states, not 49. But he would have saved the *contras*. Instead, he lost them.

Having said all that, I don't begrudge Reagan a good story. If his stories have a point, let's hear them. Reagan specializes nowadays in Soviet stories, ones the Soviet people supposedly tell each other. My favorite is about the argument between an American and a Russian over whose country has the most democracy. The American says his country does, of course. The people rule, after all. Why, he boasts, I can go to Washington, enter the White House, walk into the Oval Office, march right up to the president's desk and say, "President Reagan is doing a lousy job." To the American's surprise, the Russian wasn't taken aback by this. Oh, we have that much democracy in the Soviet Union, he insisted. Why, I can go to Moscow, enter the Kremlin, walk into the general secretary's office, march right up to his desk and say, "President Reagan's doing a lousy job."

FRED BARNES

The president we deserved.

MR. AVERAGE

MY FIRST IMPRESSIONS of Ronald Reagan—in the cheery, waxy flesh—were formed at a Boston election rally in October 1984. We were a select group—young Republicans, old Republicans, the press—but the homogeneity had its communal charms. Someone handed me a paper stars and stripes as we crammed inside the wire perimeter in Government Center. A brass band played badly; a helicopter watched from above; a strange, ebullient old man made an unremarkable, uplifting speech we had all heard somewhere before.

Unremarkable, that is, but for its unspontaneous climax. In what seemed at first like an undeserved burst of candor, Reagan pledged to raise our taxes. We cheered. A flurry of little stars momentarily obscured his face. No doubt wandered over the frosted faces around me. They knew what he meant. And then he made his first mistake: he corrected himself. The same momentary look of fear that was to

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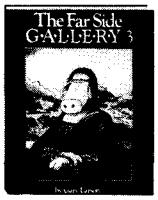

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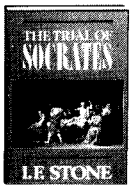

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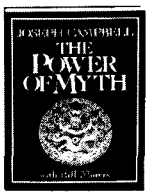

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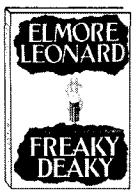

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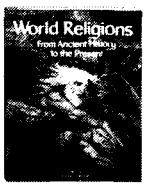

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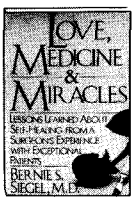

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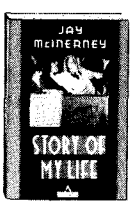

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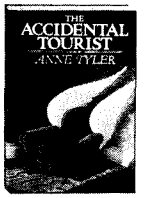

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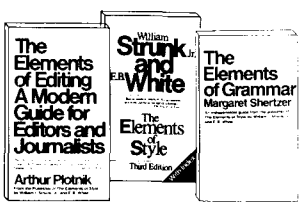
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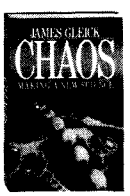

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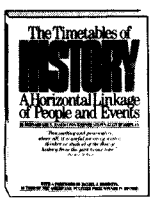

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appear in the first Reagan-Mondale debate came over Reagan. The crowd winced, temporarily embarrassed that they neither expected nor cared that the president of the United States should get such elementary things right.

I FELT POWERFULLY on that occasion—and have felt more clearly since—that Reaganism was typified more by the patronizing of a president by the people than by the patronizing of the people by a president. Reagan's failures, however unnerving to foreigners, never seemed to threaten Americans. He was too insignificant for that. The lapses were embarrassments rather than warnings—and amusing rather than unsettling. Eventually the amusement even stretched to the president himself: by the last couple of years, he was making his own Reagan jokes. But the essential atmosphere was a lack of threat, a sense of attenuated unreality, which Reagan's critics on the left correctly identified, but incorrectly understood. This constant lack of menace, this comfort with a president, was made possible by a simple fact. He was Americans' creature. They were not his. Paranoids may believe that this advertorial presidency was a conspiracy of the powerful against the powerless, and, in a sense, they're right. But the powerful, in this case, were the people. They manipulated their president from their couches, with the flick of a television remote control. He did what they wanted him to do.

Critics of Reaganism have to come to terms with this fact. Reagan's greatest political skill was his obedience. Conservatives who puzzle over why he failed to cash in his popularity chips for real policy changes have simply gotten it the wrong way round: Reagan produced the policies for the popularity chips. When Americans wanted him to cut taxes, he did so. When they wanted him to stand up to the Soviets, he obliged. When they hankered for détente, he offered them Geneva, then Reykjavik, and finally Moscow. The only crisis of his presidency came when he traded arms with people Americans profoundly distrusted. Even then, like a nervous, otherwise exemplary employee caught engaged in creative accounting, his instinct was to tell his bosses—and to believe—that he hadn't done it.

On almost all the issues on which Americans disagreed with him, Reagan caved. On social conservatism—on abortion, women's rights, affirmative action—he yielded to popular edginess. Even acts of daring were by popular demand: Grenada an attempt to push the polls up after the Lebanon debacle; the Libya raid an attack on an enemy no one could support. Only on protectionism and Central America did Reagan resist the ratings, and even then it was spirited retreat. When real presidential conviction met real congressional opposition and public indifference (over the *contras*), Reagan's instinct was to push the matter out of politics altogether—and leave it to the devices of Poindexter and North.

The result of such an experiment in democracy was as simple as it was predictable: banality. Reaganism carried all the virtues and failings of an administration limited by democratic amnesia, but sustained by democratic prudence. The fitful wisdom of the home audience ensured there were no great disasters (and only one near miss, Reykjavik). The economy performed better for longer than expected. In foreign policy—the area where democracies find it hardest to focus and harder to act—Americans' sense that they needed greater military strength proved to be the right lever against late-Brezhnevism. For the rest, Reagan lucked out. Thatcher, Kohl, and Mitterrand, the most anti-Soviet troika in postwar Europe, held the alliance together. The Soviet Union imploded. Successes—South Korea, the Philippines—hinged on lucky timing. But democratic forgetfulness also led to the real, if resolvable, deficit, precisely the kind of crunch a strong leader would have avoided. Where foresight was needed in foreign affairs—Cambodia, Haiti, Nicaragua—Reagan revealed the limitations of his masters. Only in Southwest Africa did moderation bring off a minor triumph. Only in the Gulf did political courage lead to a deserved strategic success.

TO SEE THE Reagan years as an experiment in democratic normality is, of course, to miss the obvious: Reagan's striking early ideology, and his unique reliance on the media. But these two were closely connected. Abstract ideological claims translated into images: the case for deregulation became "morning in America"; tax cuts were defended with images of construction workers and American flags; higher defense spending was backed with soft-lens panoramas in Normandy. The result, though, was that the arguments behind the conservative revival were subtly castrated. Logic degenerated into sentiment, radicalism into solipsism. Under the guise of mesmerizing a nation into accepting his ideological agenda, Reagan, wittingly or not, fatally undermined it.

What was left was pragmatism, the natural politics of a healthy liberal democracy. Or rather, two versions of pragmatism. Reagan's was the bewilderingly incoherent, postmodern variety: the switch from hawkishness to sentimentality with the Soviets; from anti-government hysteria to a Veterans post in the Cabinet; from Bork to Thornburgh; from Bennett to Cavazos; from Social Security cuts to the catastrophic health insurance bill; from *Achille Lauro* to the Iran-*contra* affair, the ultimate pragmatic enterprise. If this had been the only pragmatism at work in the Reagan administration, much of what his critics claim would be true. But there was another, more principled strain as well, typified by George Shultz. If Reagan's version was "whatever the public—and production values—demand," Shultz's kind was "whatever practicality—and democratic values—permit." It scaled back SDI to more useful military and diplomatic tasks; it sought to convert Gorbachevism into substantive strategic gains for the West; it knew when to compromise on welfare and tax reform; it almost developed successes in the Philippines and Korea into a genuinely evenhanded policy of democratic interventionism.

It is difficult to disentangle these two pragmatisms, not least because they aided as well as undermined one another. Reagan's grasp of the political power of drama—the 1981 budget, the firing of air traffic controllers, Grenada,

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Libya—strengthened the hand of the smoother negotiators who followed in his wake. Left alone, his pragmatism wrought havoc. Combined with his cohorts, it established an entirely saner balance. Like most successful pragmatists, Reagan revealed the importance of not having a reputation as one.

There was a corollary to this resuscitation of pragmatic government. In some ways, it was the point of the whole enterprise. It was a quieter civil society. The rejection of the ideological vanities of the '60s and '70s was not the counterrevolution the neoconservatives wanted. But it was a concession to smaller idealisms: family, security, home. Much of the new "conservative" consensus actually assumed the premises of the '60s: the advances for women, blacks, gays—even under the blight of AIDS and the underclass—did not suffer serious cultural antipathy. (There is even a case that the free market boom extended them.) Rather, they developed into a saner, surer social liberalism. Even the cultural excrescences of the early '80s—the apotheosis of the body and the self—dissolved into the more traditional self-interest that is a necessary part of liberal democracy. That the excesses aroused so much comment says more in retrospect about the weird interlude of 1968 to 1978 than about the more conventional calm that has since fallen. And calm it is. Largely of their own choosing, Americans have returned to equilibrium. We are back to normal. That is both the promise and the disappointment of what Reagan has wrought.

ANDREW SULLIVAN

Ronald Reagan's goofy competence.

THE ENIGMA

BY ROBERT J. SAMUELSON

A HUGE PUZZLE hangs over Ronald Reagan's presidency. By conventional measures, it's been enormously successful. Double-digit inflation is gone. The economy is in its second-longest expansion since World War II. Reagan championed the most sweeping tax reform in decades. He proposed—and Congress enacted—a program of catastrophic health insurance for the elderly and a major overhaul of welfare. Abroad, he signed the first arms control agreement (the INF treaty) that actually reduces nuclear stockpiles. All these achievements enjoy widespread bipartisan approval. If anyone else (say, Jimmy Carter) had compiled this record, he'd be leaving to loud cheers. Reagan's reputation, however, is more complex.

Everyone concedes his popularity and accomplishments. But he's also treated with casual contempt, as if his success were a fluke. James Reston of the *New York Times* recently ridiculed "Reagan's easy optimism, his amiable incompetence, his tolerance of dubs and sleaze, his cronyism, his preoccupation with stars, his indifference to facts and convenient forgetfulness." This captures the conventional wisdom. Reagan's seen as a public relations president, often ignorant of policy. The picture is more than journalistic invention. The memoirs of White House aides (David Stockman, Donald Regan) show a man aloof from everyday government. So there's the puzzle: How did someone who worked so little at being president do so well at it? The answer is that you don't have to work hard to be a good president.

It's no accident that Reagan is the first two-term president since Eisenhower. Nor is it a coincidence that, despite high personal popularity, both these presidents have been held in low esteem by the journalistic and political elites who dominate presidential commentary. There's an unspoken idea of what a successful president should be like, and neither Eisenhower nor Reagan has conformed. This ideal president should be a forceful leader and activist. He should have a clear national vision and the political savvy to get Congress and the public to follow him. Eisenhower never fit this mold, and Reagan seemed to only at first—when the "Reagan revolution" was a popular political and media myth. Both men reacted to events. Each seemed disengaged. Ike played golf. Ron chopped wood.

The trouble with the idealized president is that it has little to do with the real world. Presidents do not succeed based on how well they advance a personal agenda. These agendas are usually overwhelmed by outside events. Truman is best remembered for the Marshall Plan: a program he didn't design for a problem that barely existed when he replaced Roosevelt. Presidents succeed or fail by how well they make sound judgments on a few issues—where presidential decisions count—that vitally affect the nation's future. Everyday management of government (including most congressional actions) doesn't matter much. Reagan bungled important matters, most obviously the budget deficits. But these lapses were outweighed by his good judgment on inflation, dealing with the Soviets, and tax

Robert J. Samuelson's columns on economic affairs appear in *Newsweek*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other papers.

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reform. By contrast, most other recent presidents have failed the good judgment test.

If Presidents Ford and Kennedy aren't counted—because each served only briefly—Reagan is the first president since Eisenhower not to leave the country in a state of acute crisis. For Lyndon Johnson, the crisis was Vietnam. For Nixon, it was Watergate. For Carter, it was mainly spiraling inflation. These presidents had accomplishments: the enactment of Medicare and Medicaid for Johnson; the opening of China for Nixon; the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty for Carter. But their achievements were overshadowed. The contrast with Reagan and Eisenhower simply confirms that the president's main job is custodial: it is to deal with the central national problems that occur on his watch, whether the problems are inherited or emerge along the way.

Reagan has been given little credit for having done well at this basic task. His glitzy lifestyle, relaxed work habits, and sugary rhetoric all suggested a man who excelled at performing ceremonial functions but disdained doing the actual job of governing. This vindicated the widely held view that Reagan was a mere actor who didn't deserve to be president. The imagery is false. His last feature movie opened in 1957. For a quarter century he's been involved in politics. For 16 of those years he's held two of the nation's highest elective offices. If he's not a professional politician, who is?

TO EXPLAIN Reagan's success, his critics are full of theories. One is "luck." Reagan had little to do with his administration's achievements and everything to do with its failures. Thus: Paul Volcker (former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board and a 1979 appointee of Carter) defeated double-digit inflation; Treasury Secretary James A. Baker III engineered tax reform; Secretary of State George Shultz (and the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev) made arms control possible; other subordinates handled catastrophic health insurance and welfare reform. But Reagan's incompetence led to the fiascos, from budget deficits to Iran-*contra*. Yet how did such a dopey president (tolerant of "cronyism" and "sleaze") manage to have so many competent subordinates? And if the president was merely manipulated by his subordinates, how was it that he repeatedly ignored their advice in many areas—the budget deficits being the best example?

The good-luck theory clearly fails to explain Reagan's greatest accomplishment and the pillar of his popularity: the reduction of double-digit inflation. The idea that Volcker ought to receive all the credit, and Reagan none, is preposterous. It's true that Volcker led the attack. But though nominally "independent" of the White House, the Federal Reserve cannot long oppose presidential wishes without facing intense political pressures that no agency of technocrats can easily withstand. William Greider's *Secrets of the Temple*—a chronicle of Volcker's time at the Fed—shows that his policies had Reagan's encouragement and backing. After one 1981 session between the two men, David Stockman concluded: "Volcker couldn't have come out of that meeting thinking anything but that the White House wanted tightening."

The ensuing 1981-82 recession was more severe than anyone anticipated. Unemployment reached a peak of 10.8 percent in late 1982. But Volcker did not relax the tough, high interest rate policies until inflation was clearly broken—and Reagan didn't force his hand by blasting the Fed in public. That's the important point. It's easy to forget now how much economists agonized in the late 1970s over the difficulty of controlling inflation. Reagan and Volcker showed that government could govern. With nerve and patience, someone could take the unpopular decisions that had huge long-term benefits. Would Carter have done the same? The answer surely is no.

Carter had trouble sticking with any anti-inflation policy. He tinkered with price and credit controls. As unemployment passed nine percent, he probably would have panicked and forced Volcker to relent. The risk would have been continued stagflation. With inflation at six to eight percent (down from 1979's 13.3 percent), fear of going back into double digits would have inhibited the recovery. Carter partisans say he's unfairly maligned. They blame his inflation on oil prices and credit him for naming Volcker. The first argument is wrong. By 1978—before the second oil shock—inflation had reached nine percent, up from 4.8 percent in 1976, and was rising. As for Volcker, he was an afterthought. Carter was firing Treasury Secretary W. Michael Blumenthal and replacing him with Fed Chairman G. William Miller. Someone had to run the Fed, and Volcker wasn't even the first choice.

ANOTHER ANTI-REAGAN theory is that his success is a mirage. The press was hypnotized by his charm or manipulated by media advisers. This theory is also crazy. First, the press dwelled on Reagan's failures, bad habits, and embarrassments, from the disastrous Lebanon policy to his press conference errors to Nancy's astrologer. Second, the theory makes his popularity a media contrivance separate from public approval of his performance. Opinion polls contradict that. In his first two years Reagan's average approval ratings were below those of every president—except Ford—since Truman, as sociologists Michael Shudson and Elliot King of the University of California, San Diego, have pointed out. In his second year, for instance, Reagan's approval rating averaged 43 percent compared with Carter's 46 percent, Nixon's 56 percent, Johnson's 67 percent, Kennedy's 72 percent, and Eisenhower's 65 percent. The ratings rose after people found the Reagan presidency more to their liking: that is, after inflation dropped and the 1981-82 recession ended.

Where Reagan's critics hit pay dirt are the budget deficits. There were times (especially after his landslide 1984 re-election) when more energetic leadership might have broken the deadlock. The president held back. Either he wouldn't risk unpopular actions or believed that the deficits would restrain government spending. So the deficits persist. But his failure needs to be kept in perspective. The apocalyptic language often used to describe it has a political purpose: to portray the deficits as such a catastrophe—such an awesome act of irresponsibility—that they cancel

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any Reagan achievements. This view misrepresents both the politics and economics of deficits.

By 1980 Americans simply wanted more government than they were willing to pay for. They thought taxes were too high and defense spending too low. They opposed cuts in government services, especially entitlements such as Social Security or Medicare. No one wanted budget deficits. These preferences couldn't all be met simultaneously. Reagan emphasized lower taxes and higher defense spending. Congress resisted cuts in domestic spending. Deficits emerged because they're the least painful political alternative. For all of Reagan's stubbornness on taxes, he didn't cut them so much as stabilize them. In the past three years they've averaged 18.9 percent of gross national product, compared with 18.8 percent in the Carter years and 20.1 percent in 1981. Congress has halted the defense buildup. The deficits endure because they reflect genuine conflicts in popular demands.

IT'S TRUE, as charged, that the United States has lived beyond its means. Part of Reagan's prosperity was borrowed from the future. Our excess spending was covered by imports. Now that the trade deficit is dropping, choices can't be postponed indefinitely. There are two ways to restrain our excess national spending: we can do so explicitly by reducing the budget deficits; or we can let the market do the job through higher interest rates, exchange rate changes, more inflation, or some other mechanism that will restrain private spending. The danger of leaving the job to the market is that the ultimate social costs may be higher. For example, higher interest rates could depress private investment, which might harm future productivity growth and living standards.

These economic consequences are serious, but not calamitous. The economy's main problem is actually the poor growth of productivity—the ability to raise our national wealth. This is the basic cause of the budget deficits. When productivity rose rapidly in the 1950s and '60s, people felt they could afford more government and more private spending. Now the conflict is acute. Economists don't fully understand the productivity slowdown. Nor can government easily cure it. But the Reagan years coincided with an improvement. Since 1979 business productivity has grown 1.4 percent annually. That's twice the 0.6 percent rate between 1973 and 1979, but below the 1947-73 average of three percent. Despite budget deficits and other problems—stubborn poverty and the savings and loan crisis, to mention two—the economy is far healthier today than a decade ago.

A president can't do everything. The presidency is, as political scientist Richard Neustadt has argued, a weak institution. Other centers of power abound, as do opportunities for political failure. The president cannot determine every piece of legislation, which, regardless of his personal views, will be largely shaped by bureaucrats, interest groups, and congressional committees. Foreign relations with most countries have their own drift. A president who tries to do too much risks seeing his reputation sink under the weight of all the visible (and inevitable) setbacks. He must pick and choose what he considers important. Unlike Johnson, Nixon, and Carter, Reagan preserved the authority of his office.

In this, he also resembles Eisenhower. When historians rummaged through Eisenhower's presidency, they discovered that the general was far more crafty and calculated than contemporaries had thought. Perhaps historians will decide the same of Reagan. But perhaps not: the inside of the White House is far more visible today—with tidal waves of media leaks and every janitor writing a memoir—than in Eisenhower's era. Maybe Reagan acted, or didn't, mostly on instinct. But whatever the case, Eisenhower and Reagan shared a common characteristic disparaged by their critics: an ability to stay above events.

Eisenhower was criticized for being too "non-political." Reagan was more ideological and partisan, but his partisanship was often only cosmetic and rhetorical. His social agenda (anti-abortion, school prayer), which antagonized majorities of Americans, was pursued halfheartedly. Where Reagan strayed too far from the mainstream, he was frustrated by Congress, interest groups, or public opinion. But he accepted these restraints. There was no fanatical fight to keep James Watt in the Cabinet. Like Eisenhower, Reagan sensed that a president cannot succeed unless he is a unifying figure. And he cannot be that if he becomes too deeply embroiled in too many political firefights.

THE TRUTH IS that the Reagan presidency falls firmly in the centrist tradition of U.S. politics. A liberal could as easily boast of his major accomplishments: inflation's decline, tax reform, the arms control treaty, welfare reform. Reagan gets blamed for many things that would have happened even if he hadn't become president. Government social spending would have been squeezed anyway, simply because there was less money to pay for old and new programs. Granting this, Reagan's changes to government were modest. He didn't demolish the welfare state or end demands for more government services. Indeed, his success in lowering inflation "had the unintended consequence of ending the revolt against government," as analyst William Schneider has noted.

By the same token, Reagan didn't transform the political landscape. The Great Communicator didn't create a conservative majority. In 1987 only 20 percent of college freshmen considered themselves "conservative," while 25 percent labeled themselves "liberal" and 56 percent "middle of the road." The figures have hardly changed since 1980, when conservatives were 18 percent; liberals, 22 percent; and middle-of-the-roaders, 60 percent. The conservatives are disappointed that Reagan didn't do more. But they misunderstand what happened. "We underestimated the stamina of liberalism," Edwin J. Feulner Jr., head of the Heritage Foundation, recently complained. No, they misjudged Reagan. His presidency has been more cautious than conservative. In the end, it's been a triumph of competence, not ideology. □

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STANLEY KAUFFMANN ON FILMS

Matters of Fact

Mississippi Burning
(Orion)

Rain Man
(United Artists)

Docudrama is a dubious genre; something that pretends to be docudrama is even more dubious. *Mississippi Burning* was patently based on the murder of three civil rights workers in June 1964—a local black, James Chaney, and two white Northerners, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. Admittedly it would be difficult to make a film on that subject and keep it more document than invention, but this film doesn't try very hard. It wants praise for facing facts fearlessly without being bound by them. A few lines, tucked in at the very end after the long closing list of credits, tell us that *Mississippi Burning* is not factual, that it was only suggested by the facts. This strategy licensed the filmmakers—Chris Gerolmo, the writer, Alan Parker, the director, Frederick Zollo and Robert F. Colesberry, the producers—to lard the story with movie stuff in order to make it "play."

This is tipped right at the start. The three victims are driving hard trying to escape a posse and we hear their conversation. Who recorded it? we wonder. Then we hear the exchanges with their murderers. Same question. Then two FBI agents arrive to investigate, dressed in those well-worn movie rigs, the new chief who is bound by rules and his veteran aide who knows how to get things done. Then the veteran is attracted to the wife of a deputy sheriff who is under suspicion. Then the wife, tired of hatred and attracted to the veteran, informs on her husband to him. After all these fictional clichés, the picture closes with a documentary touch: shots of the principal culprits with the prison terms they received, just as if the film were factual. To finish there's an overnight miracle, a group of blacks and whites singing together.

This tired fictioneering is made to seem all the more rancid because it's set in a context of assaultive realism: the brutality of the white persecution of blacks. This war of the whites, both against blacks and against the white outsiders who want to help them, is ripped across the screen with frightening force. The Deep South's reasons for this war are spewed with frightening venom: the desire to preserve Anglo-Saxon democracy, the hatred of interference by Communists, Jews, atheists, etc. These sequences ring hard and true in the midst of a decor of movie gelatin.

Given those sequences, the biggest surprise in the film is that the states of Mississippi and Alabama cooperated in the making of *Mississippi Burning*. Of course the production put money in the pockets of residents in the area—many of them are seen in the film—but I doubt that this would have been decisive 24 years ago. Perhaps the clearest sign of progress in race relations down there is that the location shooting was done where it was.

Frances McDormand plays the deputy's wife with the scrawny life, a trite gingham-housedress part, but she makes it somewhat affecting. Willem Dafoe, who had the title role in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, plays the rule-book FBI agent adequately but with not quite enough quiet power under his reticence. As his veteran aide, Gene Hackman is breathtakingly good. This aide was himself once a Mississippi sheriff—we're never told why he dropped his "regional" beliefs to become an enforcer of federal law—and Hackman slips into the role as if he'd been waiting for it all his life. But he always does that. Credibility is never an issue with Hackman: he seems incapable of a false note. He is one of the busiest American stars, a sort of domestic Gérard Depardieu, and like Depardieu, the astonishment is not only that he does so much but that he does so much of it so well. Fierceness, humor, maleness without swagger, tenderness without slop—Hackman masters them all with the good actor's sheer concentration that paralyzes any doubt about his truth. His range, so far, is narrow, but within it he does wonders.

Dustin Hoffman, an even more extraordinary talent, plays an autistic savant in *Rain Man*. This sort of mental case was once called an idiot savant, a person severely limited in powers, emotionally unstable, socially malfunctioning, but with fantastic ability in restricted ways. This man, for example, can memorize pages of a telephone book at a glance, at a glance can count the number of toothpicks that have fallen out of a box, in a flash can answer complex arithmetical questions. But he can't take care of himself.

As we'd expect, Hoffman prepared carefully for the role by observation, reading, and consultation with experts. Presumably he's got it right. To a layman he's utterly convincing. The next question is: Is it acting? Or is it only replication?

In the Fall/Winter 1987 issue of *Theater*, Daniel Gerould wrote fascinatingly

FILMS WORTH SEEING

The Accused. A bitter title. A woman is gang-raped in a tavern and finds even more horror by bringing charges. Jodie Foster is the victim, Kelly McGillis the prosecutor. Much of it is vivid. (Reviewed 11/21/88)

Buster. English perfect-crime story—factual: the Great Bank Robbery of 1963—vitalized by good acting and unusual character traits. (12/19/88)

A Cry in the Dark. Meryl Streep, reincarnated *again*, as the mother of a murdered infant in a celebrated Australian case. It's all touched with antipodean remoteness but is made with skill. (12/5/88)

Hotel Terminus. Marcel Ophuls's latest documentary examines Klaus Barbie's life, especially after the Second World War. Overlong, but a lot of it is too grim to be called ironic. (10/24/88)

SK

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about a group called SIMULATIONS. It's made up of Equity actors, based in New Jersey, who perform at medical meetings and clinics. A member of the group, well briefed and rehearsed, will "do" an arthritic person or a heart attack victim or whatever is required so graphically and authentically that a medical lecturer is able to use the performance to illustrate symptoms.

Technically, this is acting, for the basic banal reason that the performer is not really suffering from the affliction. But the name of the group is the best description of this activity. The actor of Richard III does more than realistically simulate a hunched back and a limp.

Hoffman does what he can with the role, but in the main, he is just given different sets of circumstances in which to display the man's symptoms. Newspaper stories tell us that he was quite aware of the risk he ran in doing a part that could not progress or even significantly alter but that he wanted to do it anyway. Well, now he has done it and, I hope, is content with the replication.

Further, the replication is placed within a screenplay—by Ronald Bass and Barry Morrow—that is one more rerun of a weary TV genre: find a disease or an impairment that is dramatic, knock together some Big Scenes around it, then tie the whole thing up with hopeful tears. In *Rain Man* the results are a bit stiffer than usual because the ailing person can't cognitively participate in the story and because there's no real point in the whole enterprise, nothing to be learned from it. A film about, say, AIDS could teach us something about AIDS, about attitudes toward it, but what specifically is the point in knowing more about an autistic savant? There's a faint scent of exploitation in the air. ("Hey, no one's ever done *this* before.")

Tom Cruise plays a smoothie car salesman in Los Angeles who discovers that he has an older brother, Hoffman, in an Ohio mental home and that their father, recently deceased, left his whole sizable fortune to that brother. Cruise abducts Hoffman from the home and sets out for L.A. with him in hope of getting half the estate as ransom from the director of the home, who is the trustee. Would you believe—*try*—that en route across the country by car Cruise becomes genuinely fond of his brother? And not just because Hoffman's memory for figures helps Cruise to win $85,000 in Las Vegas.

Cruise is becoming a real star, confident and gleaming. But neither he nor Hoffman nor the cleverness of the director, Barry Levinson, can prevail against a screenplay that has a beginning at the Ohio home, a finish in L.A., and nothing much in between. Cruise's occasional outbursts of angry frustration, Hoffman's occasional touches of panic, the long shots of gorgeous Western scenery, are only fillers.

MARK STEVENS ON ART

Pessimist At Play

In 1961 Jasper Johns made a small sculpture, in the shape of a brick, titled *The Critic Sees*. It portrays a pair of spectacles behind which are two open mouths. What then seemed a smart joke now looks like a serious prophecy. Johns's subtle and mysterious work has become for many people the main meat. Not only critics, but also collectors and museumgoers chew over, pick apart, breathe upon, and digest his art. The Philadelphia Museum of Art is now showing a selection of Johns's work of the last 15 years. Before discussing the art, it might help to talk about this problem of seeing with the mouth, for the chewing has become distracting, even monstrous.

The most pronounced mouthing, a real smack and slurp, has come from collectors. At auction recently, a 1959 Johns painting, *False Start*, was bought for $17 million, a huge sum for work by a complex artist who is very much alive. It is true that Johns makes tastily painted pictures, that he is far from prolific, and that he keeps a goodly number of paintings himself, all of which jacks up the price. It is also true that the international art world is gluttonous. But other appetites, subtler but no less powerful, have also prompted people to put so much money where their mouth is: for many in the art world, Jasper Johns has become the last Great Artist in the modernist tradition.

Johns occupies this position because he paints well, but also because he fits certain stereotypes. Art history is often regarded as a succession of battles in which young rebels challenge older masters. Then they themselves become the legislators of their world. In this overly simple view, Johns fought the last big battle of postwar art. In place of Pollock's and De Kooning's warm spontaneity, he proposed a cool reserve. Instead of the private scribble of the self, he offered the "given" or public image, such as flags, targets, maps, and ale cans. His ironic disposition, his intellectual interests, and his appropriations from pop culture proved very influential. He became a father to the subsequent styles of pop, minimal, and conceptual art.

Johns also fit another Great Artist stereotype. With age, the master is supposed to raise his mask and become wise and death-haunted. The evolution of Johns's art shows such a direction, moving from the disguises of the earlier work to the more direct exposure of the later, in which meditations upon mortality are important. Most recent criticism has emphasized this new, autobiographical inflection; and Johns himself, in a 1978 interview, confirmed that he had tried "to hide my personality, my psychological state, my emotions" in the early pictures. "This was partly due to my feelings about myself and partly due to my feelings about painting at the time. I sort of stuck to my guns for a while but eventually it seemed like a losing battle. Finally one must simply drop the reserve."

Not least, Johns has offered exciting work to writers, critics, and art historians, for all of whom chewing is a way of life. Since World War II, a vast bureaucracy of explanation has come into being. Johns's iconography is varied, difficult, and sometimes obscure, which makes it a paradise for the pedant. At the same time, the artist's tickling complexity, his feeling for how meanings multiply and change, suits those who have placed their faith in a kind of holy hermetics. Taken together, these cultural hungers—to own a piece of the last Great Artist, to compile a mountain of footnotes, to propound the eternal indeterminacy of meaning—have made it difficult to see Johns's work with any spontaneity or freshness. The best thing to do, when confronted by the Johns

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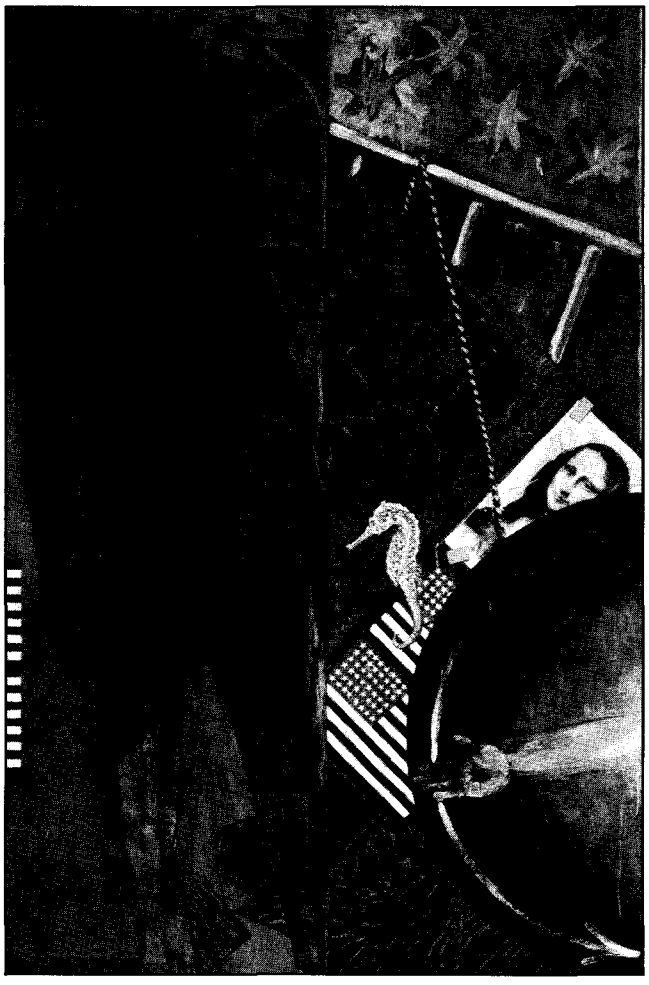
phenomenon, is simply to relax and start some serious playing around.

Johns is hardly jolly, but he is a playful pessimist, whose work has much in common with the game of hide-and-seek. A master of the musing eye, he makes meditative paintings that sometimes look the way thinking feels. Speculative thought is, among other things, also the highest form of play. It flourishes only when the mind is open to the hiphop of unexpected insight. For example, one of Johns's best-known "crosshatch" pictures is called *Corpse and Mirror*. (The crosshatches are little bunches of parallel lines—or "gestures," in the words of one critic—arranged across the canvas.) The painting takes one cue from an old surrealist game in which several artists collaborate on creating a single work, or "exquisite corpse," by each starting with just the edge of what the previous person has contributed. Johns plays the game in three panels on the left side of the picture, then provides a smudgy mirror image on the right. But that is only a start to the play. On the mirrorside there is the imprint of an iron, a black "X," a pink zigzag. The mind begins to wander with the eye through a maze of reflective meanings.

In addition to the crosshatch paintings, the Philadelphia exhibit includes later work in which Johns juxtaposes various recurring images. Some are familiar from his earlier pictures, such as the flag or the Savarin can. Others, such as a detail from Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece, enter later. One is never far from paradoxes, casts, decoys, and conundrums about art, reality, and illusion. In the catalog to the Philadelphia show, Mark Rosenthal has laid out the artist's iconographic clues with masterly concision, insight, and clarity. But one must still be careful. Nothing stops play faster than the tyranny of explanation. Around a Johns painting, people too often spend their time looking for keys, as if the paintings were merely puzzles in search of a solution. They are more like solutions in search of a puzzle.

The really interesting question is why Johns's playfulness has such presence. I think it begins with his gift for rules. Like a child at play, Johns is obsessed with the rules of whatever game he happens to be playing in the picture he is painting. A strict structure, not immediately recognizable, underlies many works. In the aptly titled *Scent*, for example, the crosshatch marks proceed in intricately managed patterns across three contiguous panels. One senses the power of the rule, but cannot quite grasp it. Frequently the rule seems arbitrary—which is a source of power, as dictators know. Such rules have a rather frightening aura unattainable by common good sense. In a Johns painting we typically find a certain stringency: boxes, compartments, straight lines. Even the drips seem neat. This evokes planning, intention, deduction, and the more severe processes of thought.



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But thinking is not merely a flat or linear process, and Johns, despite his rather forbidding rule-making, is no dictator. He is forever subverting, adulterating, and dodging his rules. He leaves room for the idiosyncratic. He allows space for breath. He does this not only by playing around with iconography, but also with various visual devices. That stringent boxiness, for example, is cracked open by contrasts. "My experience of life is that it's very fragmented," Johns has said. "In one place, certain kinds of things occur, and in another place, a different kind of thing occurs. I would like my work to have some vivid indication of those differences. I guess, in painting, it would amount to different kinds of space being represented in it." A painting may portray the "real" space occupied by an object (perhaps the cast of an arm), the space of art history (a detail copied from, say, Grünewald), and the space of a photograph (of Leo Castelli, for example).

Johns, who has always been known for the lusciousness of his paint-handling, also seduces the rule with his brush. A loose drip across a straight line, a gentle wavering connection in the crosshatch, a snatch of color rhyme across the boundaries of different compartments, can bring warmth and softness to the intellectual reserve of his art. Johns thinks as if to touch. His carefully worked paintings often develop a burnished or rubbed-in look, a luminosity not unlike the melancholy glow of meditation. With Johns, unlike many intellectuals, we do not feel locked in school. In the end, the rule releases the emotion.

The thinker cannot help but enter his thought; and Johns, in these painterly meditations, does not pretend otherwise. He himself makes an elusive appearance. In *The Seasons*, an autobiographical series of four paintings that evokes the passing of life, a shadow serves as the artist's surrogate. The shadow is placed among many of the images that have recurred in the artist's work (together with some new ones). What makes the shadow more than a modernist cliché is Johns's characteristic insistence on the literal: the shadow he employs comes from a tracing made of his actual shadow. It is everyman, one man, and no man.

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In Johns's work, the self remains an object of play and desire. It has a silky suggestiveness, like a shadow slipping away. Sometimes the teasing can seem precious. There are those who might grow impatient with the fussy finesse, for example, but I find Johns's vanity curiously appealing. He has reason to be vain; and there is something onanistic in almost any meditation upon the self. The elegant self-consciousness, the reworking of the same material over and over again, the irony that spools back upon itself, are the mark of the philosophical dandy—of the man who knows that beneath the surface is another surface. Besides, Johns's play is steeped in melancholy. A vanity worth noticing must cast the shadow of a skull, and Johns's reflection does seem increasingly preoccupied with death. He has long enjoyed playing with pieces of the body, and Rosenthal points out that the artist takes an interest not just in Cézanne's geometry, but also in that artist's portrait of a man with a skull. Johns, too, is more than an artist of austere and beautiful calculations.

While flirting with himself, Johns plays with the wider culture as well. His art is usually rooted in the appropriation of an image already in circulation (which is why postmodernists like him). He first saw the crosshatch, for example, on a passing car. He likes to appropriate his friend Duchamp's mustachioed appropriation of the Mona Lisa. One of his famous remarks goes:

> Take an object
> Do something to it
> Do something else to it
> " " " " "

The quotations marks nicely suggest both the playful way meanings keep changing and the boredom of such a world, for an adult's curiosity is not as hopeful as that of a child.

Johns's act of appropriation is quite different from the razzle-dazzle of many postmodernists. He brings genuine gravity to his images. If the abstract expressionists before him made the private public—if they forced themselves upon the viewer—Johns has made the public private. He takes imagery debased by too many eyes and makes it singular; he concentrates on the flag, changes it every time he uses it, turns it into something else. This is a great service in a time of the media's mass production of images. There is also something right about beginning with a given. We all see ourselves reflected in what's around us; and what's there is mostly a collection of images made by others. Perhaps Johns would like to start afresh, but culture, today, seems past that beginning.

Although Johns is famous for his reserve, Rosenthal emphasizes the artist's interest in "such highly emotive and personal artists" as Munch, Picasso, and Grünewald. Johns also greatly admires Leonardo's "Deluge" drawings, in which the artist depicted "the end of the world, and his hands were not trembling." (I suspect that Johns also enjoys Leonardo the intellectual, the methodical inventor of fanciful machines and mirrored handwriting.) As Rosenthal suggests, Johns stands in the tradition of those who try to maintain a cool eye on chaos. Indeed, I can think of no contemporary artist who more intimately combines the warm and the cool. For example, when Johns imprints the shape of the iron in encaustic (paint suspended in melted wax), what temperature is the irony?

Obviously Johns is not a painter who enters easily into either art or life. He is the prototypical intellectual, standing slightly apart, the outsider looking in. His playing will not charm those who like their art torn from the inside out. Nor will it appeal to activists with firm convictions. But Johns will delight those who feel that, in all seriousness, life is a game of mysterious rules played on the edge of chaos—and who take pleasure in some beautiful fiddling. The most appropriate critical observation on Johns's exhibit came from his friend John Cage, the musician and the connoisseur of coincidence. Cage copied out Johns's quotations from the catalog, jumbled them up, and began reciting them by chance.

TALKING TEXTS

The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

(Oxford University Press, 290 pp., $29.95)

Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial Self" by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

(Oxford University Press, 311 pp., $29.95)

In the late 1930s a young writer named Richard Wright charged that virtually all black American writers before him had approached "the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility." Having addressed themselves for too long with a schoolboy's eagerness to impress "a small white audience rather than . . . a Negro one," black writers, Wright declared, should henceforth stop catering to white tastes, and turn instead to their own religious and folk traditions in America:

> There is . . . a culture of the Negro which is his and has been addressed to him; a culture which has, for good or ill, helped to clarify his consciousness and create emotional attitudes which are conducive to action. This culture has stemmed mainly from two sources: (1) the Negro church; (2) and the folklore of the Negro people.

Wright issued this manifesto as a Marxist who believed that "a Negro writer must create in his readers' minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of their toil." He was committed to the urgent project of raising his people's political consciousness, and he believed that the black religious and folk heritage in America could become instruments toward that purpose.

Now, more than a half century later, Henry Louis Gates Jr., in a series of loosely connected essays on topics ranging from the West African god Esu-Elgebara, a deity of fertility and knowledge "who interprets the will of the gods to man," to the fiction of Alice Walker, has set out to expose the common roots of black consciousness in Africa and America, and thereby to "identify a theory of criticism that is inscribed within the black

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vernacular tradition" from its beginnings in tribal myth. Gates, the W. E. B. DuBois Professor of Literature at Cornell, is concerned with some of the same issues as was Wright: with the pain of self-recognition for black children; with the continuing struggle (even after the emergence of a black middle class) against the subhuman black image in the white mind; with the restorative power of humor in the face of degradation. Wright, of course, believed in Soviet socialism as the best model for social justice in America; those were the heady days before the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and Stalin's show trials. Gates, by contrast, is writing from within the American academy at a time when the idea of revolution seems mainly an abstraction to be debated in arcane journals by tenured literati.

IT IS unfair, perhaps, to hold a critic accountable to a rhetorical standard set by a great writer. Wright was looking for the language that would most effectively represent intolerable experience, while Gates is trying to represent the ways in which blacks in America have written about that experience. But Gates is also working within a tradition that tends to doubt the distinction between critical work and creative work, that endows both with comparable homiletic power. In confronting the delicate and highly charged question of cultural continuity between Africa and America, Gates believes that what is needed now are "black, text-specific theories" whose genealogies lie in African and Afro-American folk culture, where they are waiting to be discovered. He is committed to "the authority of the black vernacular tradition, a nameless, selfless tradition, at once collective and compelling, true somehow to the unwritten text of a common blackness," which, if traced back to its origins, serves as a "signpost at that liminal crossroads of culture contact and ensuing difference at which Africa meets Afro-America."

Beginning with a long chapter ambiguously titled "A Myth of Origins: Esu-Elgebara and the Signifying Monkey," Gates surveys some of the forms in which this "one specific trickster figure . . . recurs with startling frequency in black mythology in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America." Gates approaches the works of Afro-American literature, too, with this premise of its continuity with the African past. He is committed, moreover, to the idea of a

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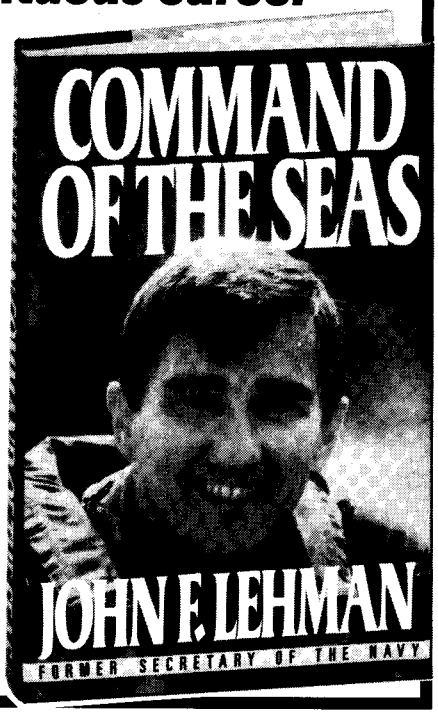

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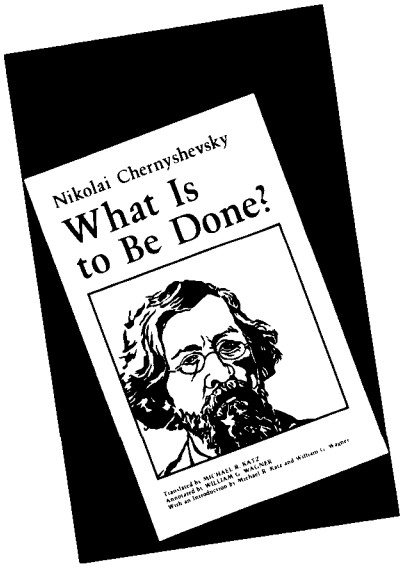

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natural linkage between texts and the exegetical method by which their inner spirit can be revealed. This is an attractive, if anachronistic, notion. It implies that the responsible critic ought to honor the spirit of his subject by emulating it—a worthy imperative that seems to have a certain urgency for Gates, since he goes so far as to apologize, in the preface to *The Signifying Monkey*, for having written a book that his parents and brother are unlikely to understand. What he apparently means by this disclaimer is that, despite his inclination to meet the texts on their own terms, he has written his study largely in the hermetic language of contemporary literary theory, and wishes it could be otherwise. Many of his readers will wish so, too.

BY "SIGNIFYING," Gates most often means something close to the idea, made familiar by Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom, that writers throw off the oppressive weight of their predecessors by first incorporating, then transforming, them. Although black writers have performed this revisionary activity on both black and white texts, Gates is mainly interested in defining an Afro-American tradition by showing the ways in which (as Bloom might say) it willfully misquotes itself.

For Gates, this collapse of the past and the future into a continuous literary present takes place within the familial boundaries of Afro-American writing itself. Thus (although she is not one of Gates's examples) Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, may be said to have in mind certain excruciating precedents in the slave-literature for her tale of infanticide, or perhaps the terrible moment in a novel by Chester Himes when the narrator reflects that it might be better for a screaming baby if "they'd cut his throat and bury him in the backyard before he got old enough to know he was a nigger." Morrison, of course, also "signifies" the texts of Faulkner; but Gates applies his literary-historical definition of "Signifyin(g)" mainly to the relations between black texts and other black texts.

The "Signifying" of Gates's title is what is nowadays called "multivalent." Its primary meaning is simply "denoting," or "representing." But its concurrent meaning (as suggested by an alternate spelling that capitalizes "S" and brackets "g" to indicate the consonant that tends to get dropped in colloquial black speech) is quite different. As Gates explains, with a monologue from H. Rap Brown:

> A session [of Signifyin(g)] would start maybe by a brother
> saying, "Man, before you mess with me
> you'd rather run rabbits, eat shit and
> bark at the moon." Then, if he was talking
> to me, I'd tell him:
>
> Man, you must don't know who I am.
> I'm sweet peeter jeeter the womb beater
> The baby maker the cradle shaker
> The deerslayer the buckbinder the women finder
> . . . . .
> I'm the man who walked the water and tied
> the whale's tail in a knot
> Taught the little fishes how to swim
> . . . . . .
> I might not be the best in the world, but I'm in the top two and my
> brother's getting old.
> Ain't nothing bad 'bout you but your breath.

This catalog of extravagances is assembled (by H. Rap Brown) with an exhilarating inventiveness and a boastful joy. It is an inner-city version of verbal one-upmanship that is both cruel and respectful toward its audience, in the way that only certain forms of antagonistic performance can be. The word "bad" in the final line is perhaps the purest example of what Gates means by "Signifyin(g)"—it is simultaneously an endorsement and a reversal of the conventional meaning of the word in white usage. Both meanings, white and black, are present. The word is thereby enriched.

THERE ARE many other entertaining examples of "Signifyin(g)" in Gates's book. Here is a brief one that is closer in its diction to the norms of academic discourse: "Nigger, your breed ain't metaphysical," says Robert Penn Warren in his poem "Pondy Woods." "Cracker," Sterling A. Brown replies some years later, "your breed ain't exegetical." In this case, the repetitive and parodic energy of "Signifyin(g)" is paramount, which is what Gates has chiefly in mind when he explains that "Signifyin(g) is my metaphor for literary history." Gates means that repetition, revision, and usurpation are as integral to black street talk as they are to the history of Western poetry. Thus he establishes a connection between what is now called "intertextuality" (it was formerly known as allusion) and a particular black folk tradition that involves parodic mimicry.

As Gates recognizes, "Signifyin(g)," whether verbal or wordlessly dramatic, is a human activity, not a black one. Rap Brown's banter, for instance, in its hyperbolic appropriation to the self of fertility myths and creation myths borrowed from the dominant culture, is remarkably akin to the tradition of Southwestern humor that culminated in Twain, and to the poetry of Whitman. As a form of creative play somewhere between sadism and ceremony, it is also close to the old vaudeville routine of stepped retaliation: one thinks of the Laurel and Hardy skit in which, as traveling salesmen, they break a prospective customer's flower pot after he slams the door on them. What follows is a stately sequence of symmetrical reprisals: headlights, then houselights smashed; bumpers, then trellises ripped out—until, after a crescendo of mutual destruction, car and house lie in ruins.

When Gates uses "Signifyin(g)" to mean something like the ferocious language-game of Rap Brown, he is intent on establishing an indigenous black tradition. He is a lively observer of its manifestations in various forms of black expression, from the Yoruba myths of the trickster god Esu to the Afro-American folktales of the "Signifyin(g)" monkey, who taunts the proud lion and the obtuse elephant with his wit. But Gates is aware, I think, that neither his observations on literary influence nor his explorations of folk traditions finally constitute an inductive inquiry into the roots of Afro-American literature. "Each of us," he concedes, "brings to a text an implicit theory of literature," rather than finding it there. *The Signifying Monkey* is really about the search for legitimizing precedents in black culture for a literary theory that Gates learned mainly at Yale.

GATES IS au courant in his deployment of the latest literary technologies. But he is somewhat out of step with the historicism that has come to inform literary criticism in the last decade or so. His sense of the relations between texts is oddly ethereal. They seem to exist for him in some kind of timeless continuum, in which they exert mutual attraction and repulsion. He talks about the slave narrative, for example, as a "countergenre, a mediation between the novel of sentiment and the picaresque, oscillating somewhere between the two in a bipolar moment." This is a way of saying that the slave narrative combines elements of piety, the deliverance plot, swashbuckling, and even deflating hu-

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mor at the master's expense. But the remark attends very little to the complex genealogy of the texts.

Gates's framework for understanding black texts is essentially that of European romantic fiction. That is arguably one universe in which the slave narrative can be placed. But surely one must ask whether those narratives were forced into that mold by the abolitionist editors who in many cases supervised their transcription and publication, and may have, in the process, imposed a known form upon unknown experience. Were the generic conventions of European fiction imposed upon the minds of barely literate ex-slaves? Or is Gates talking about structural resemblances that cannot be causally explained? These fundamentally historical questions do not arise much in Gates's work.

SIMILARLY, Gates wants not to stress the roots of certain black texts in white traditions (the slave narratives are rich in biblical, especially Old Testament elements), but he sees them resolutely through European literary perspective. There is within this new-style critic an old New Critic, who values in a text the qualities of ambiguity, irony, allusiveness, structural intricacy—the very features emphasized by T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Allen Tate, but nowadays condemned as expressions of the withdrawal of literary modernism from the scene of progressive political struggle. Gates is in the singular position of sharing the vocabulary, the style, and the political disposition of his critical contemporaries while facing a literature that he wants to celebrate rather than debunk.

This, I think, is the central problem for Afro-American literary criticism, of which Gates's work is the most ambitious example to date. Despite the bad reputation that close formal analysis has acquired among critics who consider it an evasion of political analysis, it can still claim to be in the service of a radical social criticism when applied to texts that can be shown to be fundamentally at odds with the social order. Thus it is possible for Gates to gloss Frederick Douglass's statement to his readers that "you have seen how a man became a slave, you will see how a slave became a man" with the rather professorial remark that Douglass's "major contribution to the slave's narrative was to make chiasmus the central trope."

Here is my favorite example from the slave literature of the subversive force within an apparently deferential text. It is an apparently benign dialogue between a slave named Pompey and his master, who is preparing for a duel:

> Pompey, how do I look?
> O, massa, mighty.
> What do you mean "mighty," Pompey?
> Why, massa, you look noble.
> What do you mean by "noble"?
> Why, sar, you just look like one *lion*.
> Why, Pompey, where have you ever seen a lion?
> I see one down in yonder field the other day, massa.
> Pompey, you foolish fellow, that was a *jackass*.
> Was it, massa? Well, you look just like him.

These slave texts, in other words, are simultaneously dependent on, and free of, white models; and despite the many wonderful instances of sly "Signifyin(g)," their paradoxical relationship to white texts is not easy to resolve.

Gates writes of Frederick Douglass, for example, with a reverential passion that is as moving as it is virtually unknown in contemporary writing about other 19th-century American figures. (Andrew Jackson, once treated by mainstream scholars as a populist hero, is now chiefly represented as an Indian-killing demagogue; Herman Melville, once thought of as the epic poet of democracy, is now often described as a witting apologist for corporate expediency.) And yet Gates, even as he wants to represent Douglass as a liberator who escaped the racist categories in which he was imprisoned, must recognize Douglass's assent to other crippling assumptions imposed on him by the same culture that enslaved him: the Enlightenment premise, for instance, that only literacy denotes civilization.

There is a problem for the radical critic, again, at the end of Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave* (1845), when Douglass reports that although the menial work he finds as a freeman is "dirty and hard," he "went at it with a glad heart and a willing hand . . . with the rapture . . . which can be understood only by those who have been slaves." This declaration of contentment in poverty and toil—reassuring, no doubt, to whites nervous about black aspirations—is a cry of triumph at finally being treated like a man; but it is also, to the radical critic of capitalist culture, a concession that being free in America can mean to be gratefully underpaid for labor that nobody else wants to perform.

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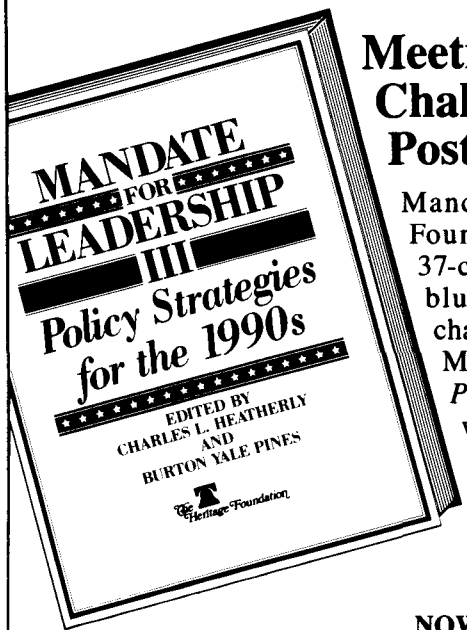
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It sounds a lot more like advice from Benjamin Franklin than like the irreverence of the signifying monkey.

GATES'S PROBLEM, the problem of Afro-American literary criticism today, is that he wishes to combine a critical advocacy of certain literary works with a spirit of opposition toward the culture that produced them. The problem has been resolved by other black critics through the practice of literary biography, which has the capacity to describe the inhibiting context within which the dissenting imagination in America has managed to flourish. Others, such as Houston Baker Jr., have pointed out that the difference between the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance (which remains the authorizing moment for Afro-American letters) and the larger modernist movement of which it was a part has to do with this same distinction between attacking the regnant culture and generating an alternative: "Rather than bashing the bourgeoisie," Baker has written, as the Anglo-American modernists were doing, black writers in the 1920s and '30s "were attempting to create one."

In the 1980s, rather than dismantling the received literary canon (as many of their white counterparts are doing), many black critics are attempting to build one. Despite the delicacy and the constructive nature of this task, however, Gates tends to fall back into the portentous jargon of a literary criticism that is ill-suited to it. His analysis is murderously dissecting, a reductive translation of the living language of Ralph Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston into the taxonomies of Mikhail Bakhtin and Jacques Lacan.

It is also frequently downright silly. After noting, for example, the distinction between white and black uses of "signifying," Gates generalizes his observation into the statement that "all homonyms depend on the absent presence of received concepts associated with a signifier." Now, it is true that the force of the word "Signifyin(g)" derives in part from the differences between its familiar linguistic sense (to denote) and the more playful sense (to make parodic fun) that Gates is interested in. Still, Gates's generalization about "absent presence" is somewhere between rhetorical exaggeration and sheer nonsense. Does the word "squash," when used to signify an indoor racquet game, always carry with it the subliminal suggestion of a yellow vegetable?

Once one gets used to this sort of thing, *The Signifying Monkey* turns out at heart to be a poignant book. It is continuous with an important discussion that has always been central to black intellectual life—Alain Locke's suggestion, for instance, that a "New Negro" was emerging in the 1920s, whose cultural identity, fostered by the rediscovery of the African past, was now secure, and that "our poets have now stopped speaking for the Negro—they speak *as* Negroes." Gates is reentering territory that was fought over by black intellectuals a half century ago. There is a certain horror in the fact that, more than 60 years later, he must still press this same case.

OF COURSE, not all black intellectuals granted the premise that a prehistorical black identity could or should be recouped. Some thought that, by insisting on their African identity, blacks were merely confirming the image of a titillating savage that lurked in the white mind. "Subdued and time-lost / are the drums /," wrote Langston Hughes, "I do not understand, / This song of atavistic land." Hughes's angriest stories in *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) were about the exploitative nature of what Eubie Blake called the "uptown heatwave"; they were stories about downtown white women who kept black boys as models for sculpting, and who, in a pinch, might ask their ebony beauty to help out with the cocktails. Park Avenue ladies did not seem to mind accepting an hors d'oeuvre from some glistening example of unspoiled primitivism; it was like bringing home a tamed monkey. (George S. Schuyler put his response to the white cult of the African this way: "Even when [the Negro] appears to be civilized, it is only necessary to beat a tom-tom or wave a rabbit's foot and he is ready to strip off his Hart Shaffner & Marx suit, grab a spear, and ride off wild-eyed on the back of a crocodile.")

The trouble with the Harlem Renaissance was that it became, at least for some of its white enthusiasts, a kind of anthropological festival. It partook of the same spirit that allowed for a long time in America that the only breasts permitted to be bared publicly were black breasts in the pages of *National Geographic*, the same spirit that lured white men north on "safari" into Harlem in search of "specialty sex." Embarrassment and prudery can only exist as a relation between two human consciousnesses: if one is judged subhuman by the other, then all is permitted. There is no such thing as a naked animal.

The willed connection of black Americans to the African past, in other words, has remained not only tenuous, but also suspect in its effects. Gates sees the difficulties, but he puts them mildly: "The degree to which the [Afro-American] figure of the Monkey is anthropologically related to the figure of the Pan-African trickster, Esu-Elgebara, shall most probably remain a matter of speculation." He acknowledges the fragility of the oral tradition with which he is working, but he pays little attention to the brutal deformation that African culture suffered in its forced translation to the New World.

STILL, whatever the pitfalls of pursuing that past, or the obstacles to furnishing the sense of that past with an empirical basis, it has never been far from the center of black intellectual life. It was the occasion for James Baldwin's eloquent insistence that the effacement of the slave experience by substituting "X" for the slavemaster's name was as much a mutilation of memory as a gesture toward freedom. It has since been the cause of a number of powerful anthropologists and historians to show the tenacity of tribal and familial identities, even under the corrosive effect of the black diaspora, even under slavery itself.

The African past may have been an ungraspable phantom, but the idea of it was not. The idea of a retrievable black history that predates slavery has been an inescapable force in the lives of black Americans. It is everywhere attested by the extraordinary literature they have produced. In this sense, Gates's books, like the prolific output of young black fiction writers in the last decade, are alive to contemporary experience, certainly more so than most academic criticism. The stakes are real for Gates, as real as they once were for those who believed that critical writing could actually further social reform or political change. This may explain his ambivalence toward the exclusionary language in which he feels compelled to write. He understands that it is not much of a political or affective instrument.

Gates is contending with one of the fundamental problems that have engaged Afro-American writers for a long time. Like the literature of other immigrant peoples, black writing in America has never strayed far from the problem of assimilation. It is important to remember that assimilation has been more

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painful for blacks than for other immigrants, because the sense of loss can never be quite attached to a recoverable past, and the sense of gain in consenting to the new American identity can never be complete.

At the end of his *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), which tells the story of a light-skinned black who marries a white woman, James Weldon Johnson writes that "I cannot repress the thought that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage." This fear, imprecise but visceral, is present from the earliest black texts, such as William Wells Brown's account, written in 1865, of his being "scraped, scrubbed, soaked, washed" on his way from fieldwork to service in the plantation house, to Malcolm X's harrowing tale of his burning the kinks out of his hair by soaking it in lye. Anguish over the racial self-hatred of American blacks must have reached a peak 20 years ago, when Eldridge Cleaver accused James Baldwin of "shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites."

YET ONCE the scrubdown has been refused and the hair "relaxer" thrown away, the great problem for the black intellectual remains the forging of an independent identity within a white culture that is hostile *and* seductive. Black reformation of white language has been one means toward that end. In the '30s the young anthropologist (and incipient novelist) Zora Neale Hurston recorded with delight the variations on standard English that she found among rural Southern blacks, who made old words like "feature" and "ugly" and "confidence" and "beaucoup" into new verbs. Forty years later, Malcolm reported the bewilderment of a downtown Negro when a hustler walks by on a Harlem street and announces his intention to pawn some clothes: "I'm going to lay a vine under the Jew's balls for a dime." The man from downtown, Malcolm remarks, looked "as if he's just heard Sanskrit."

It was not Sanskrit. Gates would call it "Signifyin(g)." However one names such reformulations of the coercive white language, they are expressions of the impulse toward black freedom. It is an impulse given impetus, as Baldwin once put it, by the fact that "the American Negro has the great advantage of never having believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling." If this has been an advantage, however, it has also been a great deprivation. It was because of this suspension between worlds—the one ungrounded and inchoate, the other forbidding and closed—that the black novel was stalled, even as it emerged as a mature genre after the Civil War. It was blocked by its contradictory impulses to conserve the memory of apartness for the former slave while helping to lift him into the civic life of his country.

That is why the first black novelists were obsessed with the figure of the mulatto, who embodied the condition of suspension between worlds. When Malcolm, a hundred years later, repudiated his Stepin Fetchit self and asserted the vigor of his blackness, he came back to the sanctification of the individual and the colorblind vocabulary of human rights. Even these angriest of black writers came to doubt that "Signifyin(g)" on Mister Charlie is ultimately the best means toward real freedom. They have looked instead for a transcendent language into which race might disappear.

GATES IS caught, I think, in something like the same pincer. His own language, to borrow a term from his preferred lexicon, tends to deconstruct itself. He is talking about universal habits of mind that operate within all literary texts; but he is also intent on identifying a unique black tradition that he believes has been slighted by (mainly white) critics. At one point he declares that "a vernacular tradition's relation to a formal literary tradition is that of a parallel discursive universe." Parallel lines, however, never meet; and most of Gates's work is devoted to showing, with valuable results, the many points of collision between black folk traditions and the "high" texts of Afro-American literature. Gates pays little attention to the points of intersection between white and black texts, but could just as well attend, say, to Ralph Ellison's allusive use of Emerson and Whitman as to his reprise of Booker T. Washington.

Eventually Gates concedes that "parallel universes . . . is an inappropriate metaphor; *perpendicular* universes is perhaps a more accurate visual description." The correction is apt. Perpendicular lines, if they are sufficiently extended, do meet. Black folk tales meet black fiction; but black texts, oral and written, also meet white texts. When Gates keeps these interracial transactions out of view, one recalls Ellison's infuriated response to Irving Howe's essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" in 1963, in which Howe argued Elli-

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son's indebtedness to Richard Wright:

> It requires real poverty of the imagination to think that [a sense of life and possibility] can come to a Negro *only* through the example of *other Negroes*, especially after the performance of the slaves in re-creating themselves, in good part, out of the images and myths of the Old Testament Jews.

Ellison had insisted in *Invisible Man* that blacks must find and keep their history in America, that to obliterate the slave-memory would be to duplicate one of the crimes of slavery itself: the destruction of a people's past. The terrible fact is that the predominantly oral traditions of West Africa *did* almost completely disappear in the decades after the Middle Passage. Gates's work, like the work of all serious black writers in America, is raised against the debilitating knowledge of this loss. It also flirts with the compensatory, but potentially insidious, idea of a residual race-consciousness that somehow survives in the blood.

In one of his more affecting sentences, Gates remarks, about the sometimes unbridgeable space between black and white expression, that "to learn to manipulate language in such a way as to facilitate the smooth navigation between [the white linguistic realm and the black] has been the challenge of black parenthood and remains so even today." Such is the crossing that we witness when W. E. B. DuBois, having written with immense respect about the black "sorrow songs" to which he was introduced in the post-Reconstruction South, nevertheless comes back to an oratorio of Handel as equally "real" music that moved him in the chapel of Fisk University. It is this same encounter that allowed Wright to say that it was Dreiser, Masters, Mencken, Anderson, and Lewis who first convinced him "that America could be shaped nearer to the hearts of those who lived in it."

The beauties, the ironies, and the sadnesses that have arisen out of such cultural collisions are not likely to cease. Consider that among all the churchgoing moralists who ran for president this year, the only effective invocation of the Christian myth on which white America was founded was made by a black preacher. When Jesse Jackson says that Joseph and Mary were the homeless of their time and Herod was the landlord, he is neither "Signifyin(g)" on a black folktale nor on a white racist myth. He is rescuing the white man's most prized language from the evangelical right, and he is talking it straight.

ANDREW DELBANCO

Andrew Delbanco teaches at Columbia University. His *The Puritan Ordeal* will be published this month by Harvard University Press.

WHITE HOUSE WATCH

On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency by Mark Hertsgaard

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 371 pp., $22.50)

Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky

(Pantheon, 380 pp., $24.95)

The argument that President Reagan got a good press from the big, elite East Coast news organizations must be made carefully. Conservative magazines, of which there are many more today than a decade ago, and daily newspaper editorial pages, the vast majority of which are eternally conservative, have been wholeheartedly admiring of Reagan as a statesman and of Reaganism as a creed. The three network news organizations, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time* and *Newsweek*—the part of the press that interests Mark Hertsgaard, Edward Herman, and Noam Chomsky—have not. The establishment press has done relatively little outright cheerleading for Reagan.

It's true that Hugh Sidey of *Time* gave Reagan the great-man treatment regularly over the years. Hertsgaard produces quotes from the late Frank Reynolds of ABC to show that he did, too. A *Time* cover story in the summer of 1986 was embarrassingly fawning: "Ronald Reagan is a sort of masterpiece of American magic, apparently one of the simplest, most uncomplicated creatures alive, and yet a character of rich meanings, of complexities that connect him with the myths and powers of his country in an unprecedented way." The East Wing press corps, led by Donnie Radcliffe of the *Washington Post*, consistently celebrated the supposed "return to elegance" of White House social life after the nightmarishly unpretentious days of the Carters.

But these were, on the whole, exceptions. Reagan never came close to being openly celebrated by scores of establishment journalists in the way that, say, John F. Kennedy was. When Reagan was praised, it was usually for being an exotic but awesome political phenomenon; I'd say that Bush has already surpassed Reagan in the kind of encomiums that carry real weight in Washington, the wise-and-responsible leader variety. The *Times* and the *Post* endorsed Reagan's opponents in 1980 and 1984. Of the three network commentators during most of the Reagan years, Bill Moyers, John Chancellor, and David Brinkley, two are former officials in Democratic administrations and all three operated within a basically liberal frame of reference (that is, one in which arms treaties are applauded and tax cuts are not). Even the most prominent conservative columnists, George Will and William Safire, for the most part kept a certain distance from Reagan in print—in Will's case, perhaps because he knew everybody was ready to pounce on him for being a buddy of the Reagans.

So the case can't rest on the positive stories the press wrote. It requires blaming the media for the negative stories they didn't write: it's a "got away with murder" theory. But there is something to it. Reagan and his aides figured out early during their years in power how to get in tune with the rhythms of the press, especially television news. They set up little narratives of policy-making, starting with his tax and budget cuts, that had well-defined plots and characters; the coverage could build up to a climax and crisply end. They provided a steady diet of good pictures and sound

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bites. Reagan made the presidency seem like a big, exciting story after the White House beat had been through a dull spell. The domestic ills of his administration—the deficit, increased poverty, Reagan's out-of-it quality—were more chronic than acute, and so were poorly suited to the standard form that tough coverage takes in Washington: exposing crimes and lies. It is no accident that it wasn't until the Iran-*contra* scandal, which involved lawbreaking followed by a cover-up, that the press really descended on the administration.

In foreign affairs, there was a tendency to focus on big events involving Reagan's travels abroad. Thus the story became how Reagan fared personally; this produced some negative coverage of the president's misadventures (Bitburg, Reykjavik), but it still conformed to Michael Deaver's strategy of focusing attention on the leading man rather than on American relations with other countries. (Throughout its post-Watergate period of increased power, the press has been cutting back on the resources it devotes to foreign coverage.) A lot of retrospectively obvious clues about Iran-*contra* went unheeded; the story broke in Lebanon, not here.

MARK HERTSGAARD has done a diligent job of interviewing reporters, editors, producers, and administration press handlers. Their observations are consistently interesting, and they provide, in the case of Deaver, a truly illuminating look into a mind trained to understand the entire sweep of national and international affairs solely in terms of how they will look on television. Taken together, the quotations in Hertsgaard's book explain quite well the forces in the press that worked in Reagan's favor. The magnitude of Reagan's victory in 1980, and the Republican capture of the Senate, took the national press completely by surprise, and left it spooked. As William Greider of *Rolling Stone* told Hertsgaard, "It was a sense of 'My God, they've elected this guy who nine months ago we thought was a hopeless clown.... [T]here's something going on here we don't understand and we don't want to get in the way.'" Once Reagan began to look like a winner, it became clear to the reporters covering him that being well plugged-in to the administration was going to help them in their own careers. That meant staying within the bounds imposed by the need for access to official sources.

But Hertsgaard has not gathered his material in order to produce a measured, pipe-puffing debriefing of the Reagan press corps. *On Bended Knee* is written in a heat of anger at Reagan, and in scorn for a journalistic culture that allowed him to run the country for eight years. Hertsgaard proceeds from the assumption that Reagan fell short of even the minimal standards of acceptable performance in the presidency: he was a "dangerous simpleton" who presided over "one of the most fantastic eras in American history," whose policies were "shallow-brained," "contradicted by objective facts," and "if judged on their merit would have been laughed out of the political arena." Hertsgaard presents as non-ideological what is really a left-wing critique of Reagan, which makes him look disingenuous.

SOME INTELLECTUAL calisthenics are required to make the interesting but not shocking results of Hertsgaard's research fit with his outrage. Throughout the book, for example, there is the sense that nothing remotely like the coverage of the Reagan administration ever happened before; past presidencies, and presidential press corps, appear through a lens as flatteringly vague as a small-town studio photographer's. Hertsgaard admits that Reagan didn't invent media manipulation, but only so that he can credit it to Richard Nixon. (All those who believe that it was Nixon and his entourage "who first grasped the applicability of mass-marketing techniques to national electoral politics," as Hertsgaard puts it, should read John William Ward's *Andrew Jackson: Symbol and Myth*.) He lets stand without correction such howlers about Reagan's predecessors as "Kennedy had the knowledge but not the will to manipulate the press," and "Johnson didn't care if he was liked." He ends by asking that "the men and women of the press return to first principles and live up to the concept of a free and independent press first upheld some 200 years ago by the American Revolution." But the Founders' concept was of a press made up of political-party organs; it's ahistorical to have them spinning in their graves over the work of big, reportorial, non-partisan news organizations that they never dreamed would exist.

Hertsgaard has an obvious interest in couching his indictment of Reagan solely in terms of (as Michael Dukakis would say) competence. If Reaganism was the product of the normal functions of a de-

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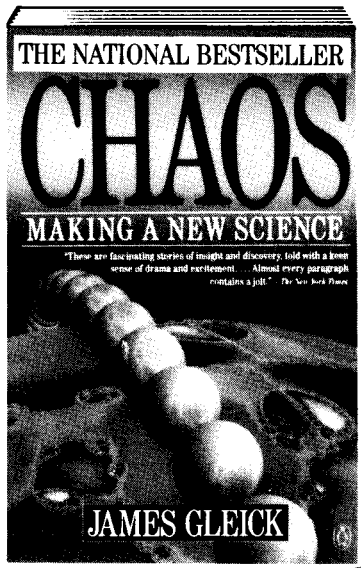

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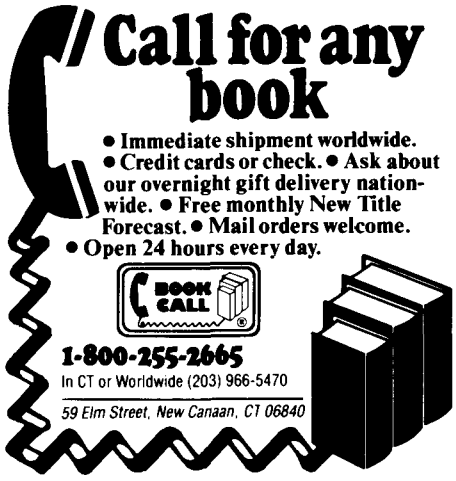
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mocracy, if the country wanted conservatism and got it, then the press's performance seems less shameful. But Hertsgaard pretty much assumes away the idea of a conservative American public. He presents Reagan as an extremist whose views were fundamentally out of line with public opinion, but congenial to corporate interests. He acknowledges Reagan's popularity, but attributes it to a combination of his likability, his handlers' propaganda skills, and the thought-shaping power of that segment of the corporate world that owns the big media companies. This theory shuts out most of the complexity of the American right (remember, in 1980 corporate America's presidential candidate was John Connally, not Ronald Reagan). It also doesn't stand up well in the wake of the 1988 election, which George Bush won in part by turning the campaign into a referendum on conservatism.

EDWARD HERMAN and Noam Chomsky have no such qualms about overt discussions of ideology and the press. They leave fewer intellectual loose ends. While Hertsgaard says the Reagan administration maintained a "propaganda apparatus," Herman and Chomsky say we live in a "propaganda state," in which the press fairly openly serves the interests of its capitalist masters. Their book proposes a "propaganda model" that would explain the functioning of the American press, and proceeds through a series of examples to test the hypothesis (which, of course, turns out to be correct). All the examples are in the realm of foreign policy. When Nicaragua abrogates civil liberties, it's big news, but the much more serious abuses in Guatemala and El Salvador get much less attention here. Genocide in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge is covered more than genocide in Cambodia by the United States and its allies. Guess why?

"Institutional critiques such as we present in this book are commonly dismissed by establishment commentators as 'conspiracy theories,' but this is merely an evasion," Herman and Chomsky say in their preface. This sounds reassuring, but it's misleading: *Manufacturing Consent* really is a conspiracy theory. Over and over Herman and Chomsky imply or say outright that the big-time press knowingly prints falsehoods and suppresses inconvenient truths, the better to maintain the party line. In no instance do they prove this. For them, the distinction between knowing and unknowing misrepresentation of reality by the press is not a very important one. This leads to the notion, advanced several times by Herman and Chomsky, that there isn't really very much difference between the *New York Times* and *Pravda*. From there, it's not far to the heart of the matter, which is that, judging by such standards as devotion to democracy and respect for human rights, there isn't much difference between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Internally, "the belief that 'we the people' rule" is, in this country, "a central principle of the system of indoctrination from early childhood, but also one with little merit, as an analysis of the social and political system will quickly reveal," Herman and Chomsky say. In foreign affairs, they treat the Soviet role in places like Central America and Indochina as being not even worth mentioning; the organized opponents of U.S.-backed regimes are simply "progressive," "popular," "indigenous," or "humanitarian." Any kind of political murder committed by the left is condemned, a little perfunctorily, and then compared with the much greater and more outrageous "mass-murder," "sadism," and "genocide" committed by the Unites States and its right-wing allies.

ALL THIS is delivered in the leaden prose of a sectarian tract. Herman and Chomsky have a weakness for tabular lingo that is supposed to give their views the aura of scientific fact ("The worth of the victim Popieluszko is valued at somewhere between 137 and 179 times that of a victim in the U.S. client states"). Though they use the word "Orwellian" a lot, they write in exactly the ideological style that Orwell so perfectly parodied: "The process of dichotomization is so internalized that the writers use the double standard within the same article, apparently unaware of their own bias." In the time-honored tradition of the left, they devote their greatest specific scorn to liberal journalists rather than conservatives. They do compare Norman Podhoretz to Joseph Goebbels, but William Shawcross, Sydney Schanberg, and Stephen Kinzer take their lumps at much greater length.

Because it is their premise that the mainstream press can't be trusted, Herman and Chomsky automatically dismiss as unreliable the standard sources on the countries they write about. They get their information mostly from re-

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ports by "independent observers," such as a Finnish commission that studied Cambodia and, for Nicaragua, the work of the Irish Inter-Party Parliamentary Delegation and the Latin American Studies Association. The overall level of evenhanded commitment to truth in *Manufacturing Consent* is such that its insistence on the authority of these reports is not convincing. Material published by American human rights organizations tends to support Herman and Chomsky's contention that Nicaragua is a much less severe human rights abuser than El Salvador or Guatemala, but their claim that "it seems fair to describe the responsibility of the United States and Pol Pot for atrocities [in Cambodia] . . . as being roughly in the same range" is, to judge from the literature, insupportable. Or, to cite an example that is small but within the competence of most American readers to assess, Herman and Chomsky say that "principled and courageous resistance" was a more common response of draft-age Americans to Vietnam than the seeking of deferments. This is not a book written for the unconverted.

WHAT HERMAN and Chomsky are right about is that the big-time American press does operate within a fairly narrow range of assumptions, and that it concentrates intensely on a small number of subjects at a time. On foreign affairs especially, its attention tends to move unpredictably from country to country, and to reflect what Herman and Chomsky, meaning to be withering, call "patriotic premises." Watching Sunday-morning policy-chat shows, for example, it's jarring to see how quickly almost all subjects except the White House and electoral politics disappear only a week or two after they seemed to be of all-consuming importance.

The press's short attention span, its reluctance to evaluate the performance of government, and its excessive emphasis on the daily byplay of political strategists is worth worrying about. Its failure to give a full-throated voice to the left, and to adopt a left perspective itself, is not. Both of these books present the two issues as inextricable, which keeps them from offering satisfying solutions to the shortcomings of the news media. They take the position that major news organizations, especially the TV networks, are too committed to reporting the statements of government officials without also offering opposing, more "diverse," views from people outside government. Hertsgaard in particular seems to envision a system in which Dan Rather would lead his broadcast by saying, "President Reagan today called the Soviet Union an 'evil empire,' but his position was sharply questioned by Robert Borosage of the Institute of Policy Studies."

In practice, with 22 minutes in which to deliver the nightly news, the TV networks don't have time to counterbalance every official statement—and people watch the news primarily because they want to know what government officials are saying. Anyway, if the networks did adopt the policy of presenting a diversity of views, surely it would mean giving as much time to right-wingers as left-wingers—Robert Borosage followed by Richard Viguerie.

The idea that breaking up the big media companies might move the press further to the left, which both books toy with, is equally dubious. As a rule, the operators of small businesses are more conservative than the operators of big businesses, who tend to have a more sophisticated understanding of the ways in which a mixed economy works to their benefit. Certainly local TV-station owners and small-town newspaper publishers are overwhelmingly to the right of the Grahams and the Sulzbergers and the Tisches.

THERE ARE only two workable ways to move the press further to the left. One is more state control. No journalist would want that, but Herman and Chomsky do. "In the long run, a democratic political order requires far wider control of and access to the media," they write. This assumes that the political order that controls the press won't be a conservative one, which is a stretch, but there are certainly plenty of examples around the world of a press controlled by a left-wing political order. Hertsgaard is vaguer on this point, though he does complain that "there exist precious few checks and balances" on the press. What seems to be his greatest hope, and the second way to move the press ideologically, is for a change of ethos among journalists, so that they become voluntarily tougher on conservative administrations.

There is a vague political tone to major-media journalism, and it is subject to change. In the 1980s what has changed the establishment press most is the increasing prosperity and influence of journalists (blue-collar consciousness

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has pretty much died out in the Washington press corps), and the rightward shift in the location of the political center. But the temptation to view the mainstream press as a potential locus for liberalism outside the electoral system should be stoutly resisted. Not only is the prospect of a politicized press a little frightening, because the press is so powerful, and so much less accountable than government; it's also probably unattainable. For a variety of reasons, the mainstream press almost always responds to, rather than creates, the political mood. For the left, if it wants more attention from the press, it's a much better bet to build up strength through political organizing and pamphleteering (like that of I. F. Stone, to whom *On Bended Knee* is dedicated) than to hope that the press will lead the public and the political system in its direction. This is what the Reagan right did all through the 1960s and 1970s, and it worked.

IF WE CAN dispense with the idea of moving the press reliably in any ideological direction, this is a moment of great opportunity for improvement. There is a deep feeling of embarrassment in the media, especially television, about the coverage of the 1988 campaign—a feeling that school-of-Deaver mastery of visuals and slogans by the Bush forces pre-empted any depth in the journalism, that too much attention was paid to the byplay of the handlers. Big-time journalism is a hothouse profession in which the internal status system exerts great influence on its members, in part because most big-time journalists don't regard their income as the measure of their rank. Most people on Wall Street are in it for the money, but most of the national press, as Hertsgaard points out, are in it for the glory.

When glory attaches to a particular kind of journalism, journalism shifts direction, quite rapidly: what gets space and air time, and what the most talented people want to do, changes. In the 1970s magazine-style New Journalism and investigative reporting were hot. In the 1980s the greatest boom has probably been in opinion journalism. The stars in all these genres—Tom Wolfe, Seymour Hersh, Bob Woodward, George Will—serve as role models for hundreds of imitators. It is true that the White House press and the political campaign media, Hertsgaard's main subjects, are so hemmed in by breaking news that they can adapt only marginally to changes in journalistic fashion. That's why magazines, lifestyle sections, and "special projects" units at the dailies and the networks are the real engines of innovation in the field.

But even the White House press changes. After failing to break the Watergate story, it became, and has remained, "tougher" at least in the sense of being willing to come on strong in press conferences. The excesses of handler coverage spring from a basically admirable desire to get into daily coverage the kind of material that was in books like *The Making of the President 1960*, *The Selling of the President*, and *The Boys on the Bus*. Even if you hate the presidential character beat, you have to admit that its growth from practically nothing into a major enterprise just in this decade is further proof of the flexibility of the national press corps' charter.

Policy coverage will, it is true, present a greater challenge to the White House press. It takes a lot of reporting to get deeply into the workings of the government, and presenting the results of the reporting requires a major commitment of column inches or air time. There isn't the same promise of sexy, audience-building material that reporting on candidates' personalities holds. The visuals aren't good. Still, one day a daily reporter, preferably a network television reporter, might figure out a way to become a media star through explaining how and why the government undertakes its major initiatives, and what the consequences are. Stranger things have happened. If depth could become hot, it would change journalism profoundly, and for the better.

NICHOLAS LEMANN

Nicholas Lemann is national correspondent for the *Atlantic*.

SPACE ODDITY

The Sykaos Papers by E. P. Thompson

(Pantheon, 482 pp., $19.95)

Why would E. P. Thompson, the great English historian, write a spaceman novel? To fire further missiles at superpower nuclear defense policy, we may assume, as per his numerous political pamphlets and recent agitations. And indeed: the spaceman lands, gets grilled by British authorities, causes international complications, and nuclear arsenals around the world produce the very effect that Thompson has always said they would. The salient points follow the well-known bent of Thompson's fears exactly.

But there are several reasons why a veteran tractarian might turn to political fiction. There are the virtuous reasons (namely to advance one's own cause), but also the sinister reasons (to undermine one's own cause). The larger the talent, the more sinister the reason, is a rule of thumb. For it must be remembered that political tractarians are, in a crucial respect, unhappy prisoners of their genre. In almost every other field of literature, writers can contradict themselves at will. A serious novelist known for misogynist themes can try his hand at feminism any time he likes, and he will be applauded for his effort, except by the hard-hearted. But a tractarian known for, say, monarchist broadsides cannot dream of anything similar. The political writer must pretend to be a monomaniac, on pain of being thought a madman. A single pamphlet, no matter how brief or mild, on regicidal themes, and that writer's career will be in tatters.

Even in fiction, the political writer must maintain a drab consistency. Yet fiction is capacious. The bad guys can orate in a novel, and the good guys can mumble. The writer can wallow in perversity chapters at a time, for the sake of plot; and when enough is enough, he can still dry himself off, as it were, with an ingenious conclusion, and preserve his sober reputation by sending his novel around the well-known bend of his long-established political principles, whatever they may be. "And so the people, weepy and very very sorry about what they had done, walked away from

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the grisly gibbet and decided to choose a *new* king. . . ." The author's public will never know the difference. The author himself may not quite know.

Thompson's bad guys are bureaucrats of the British military, guardians of the poor captured spaceman. They are stiff and soulless. Their headquarters is code-named "LUNATIC." Lacking in elementary empathy, they can't make head or tail of the extraterrestrial in their control. They employ an anthropologist, a linguist, and other academics to do that for them. The academics are tweedy, bohemian, free-thinking, and soulful. Interrogating the spaceman, they pick up some of his language, perhaps a few of his ideas. The academics have peace movement connections. They are good guys.

But it's very odd, what interrogation reveals. The spaceman's home planet of Oitar turns out to be an ultra-totalitarian computer-dominated civilization on the dog's end of ecological disaster. The Oitarian sun is burning up, the atmosphere is disappearing, and the entire civilization must decamp forthwith to another planet. In short, Earth faces a terrible menace, which is nothing other than expansionism by a totalitarian power. This is not the menace that normally leaps at one's throat from the writings of E. P. Thompson. Already colonization teams are building stations on the Moon, preparing for Earth landing.

DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

A presenter danger has never existed. And the reader begins to suspect that, unlike Thompson's brutish military types, who know a threat when they see one, the bohemian academics do not realize that outer space is, after all, the enemy. Not to put too fine a point on it, in the face of a totalitarian threat from abroad, these academics are more or less—but Thompson doesn't use this phrase—commie dupes. No! The soulless authorities hold an inquisition to see if the tweedy bohemians have been conspiring with the totalitarian foe. Shades of a dreaded past. But the soulless authorities are right, at any rate for the duration of one of the plot's innumerable twists.

Who would have imagined? Americans ("NATO") arrive at LUNATIC, unwilling to let the interrogation proceed under British responsibility. Thompson waxes indignant. He also describes KGB moles crawling through the British security system, so what are we to think? Irving Lacky, a Very Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Heritage Foundation, leads the American delegation, neoconservative maniacs every one, except for the single black, a friendly ladies' man. (Thompson's spaceman observes that non-white races are gentler, more musical, and more graceful.) And while the American maniacs are appalling and stupid, as one should hope, they do seem, in their self-defeating and idiotic way, basically loyal to Earth. Whereas with these British peace types, you can't be sure.

A confused reader might be tempted to say, hurrah for Irving Lacky, who wants to destroy Earth's enemies, and down with the commie dupes, who have no loyalty to their fellow man. E. P. Thompson can't have meant that! Unquestionably he meant something else. He will read this review with horror. But he could have stuck to writing tracts and kept his foot out of the confusion.

Finally what is to be done about the space invasion? If there is any hope, it involves the sort of 19th-century anarchist utopia in which governments around the world cede powers to an international commission of disinterested experts and scientists—or as Thompson has it, a U.N. commission, empowered to treat with the Oitarians. A very good idea, under the circumstances. But readers may notice that Thompson's nonstatist world federalism rests on a nuclear platform. A pinch of well-founded mutual fear, the possibility of certain destruction for spacemen and earthlings alike, and everyone sees their way to reason. So the negotiations go forward.

Not that any of this works out, since the plot takes still another turn. It is the United States that emerges as Earth's greatest foe. A British military man broadcasts desperate pleas for Oitarian intervention, on the grounds of, better outer space than the United States. This last twist of the plot sends the book around a bend that conforms neither to the logic of nuclear deterrence nor to the author's accustomed theme of Third Camp peace activism. Strange. In any case, one does notice that before destroying the world, deterrence did bring the Oitarians to view earthlings in a tolerant light, and nothing else would have had that effect, and there is, after all, an argument to be made, and what are we to think of that?

A tale of romance occupies the foreground. The linguist and the anthropologist fall in love with, respectively, the nurse and the spaceman. There is much discussion of laughter, love, and

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sex, all of it in *faux naif* spaceman style. On sex, for instance: "Instead of sleeping, they lie face to face and belly against belly, grip each other's corpses in their arms, and thrust their faces into each other, pushing their lips upon each other's lips . . ." The spaceman breaks out into Oitarian verse: "Your thighs move in a fugue, while up above / Your pubic mat is like a lawn of tundra. . . ."

Yes, and the author goes on, too. There are spaceman diaries, anthropological notes, news clippings, poetic treats, and the reader's eyes widen in astonishment, and stay widened. Studying *The Sykaos Papers* is like coming on the brain of an admired and familiar author, and peering inside to find all the beloved customary figures of the author's imagination engaged in satanic deliriums. The author's best-known opinions (his political views) are dancing upside down with other opinions (his views on sex) that should never have revealed themselves at all. The author's readings in Blake and Milton appear to spew from his lips in mad gibberish.

A stout crew of English workingmen goes tramping across the page muttering class resentment. Why, it's our old acquaintance, the mob, from the author's studies of 18th- and 19th-century England. Weird religious views crop up. They are the detritus of the author's studies in militant Methodism. The reader may feel a little nostalgic at some of these sights. Thompson is very good on 18th-century Methodism. On the subject of English mobs he is our Gibbon, our master thinker. Get rid of that spaceman, the reader may feel like crying. Stick with the surly proletarians!

As a sober politico reeling from the vapors of fiction, the author is not, of course, to be held accountable. He makes the point himself in a preface explaining that, wishing to modernize, he bought a word processor. But he was unable to master the technique. His hand flicked across the keyboard in exasperation, and *The Sykaos Papers* came mysteriously printing out. The novel was FAXed from outer space. This is a credible explanation, and a witty one. If the novel was not, in fact, FAXed from space, the word processor is still responsible, for if ever a book fell victim to computer prolixity, Thompson's crash landing is it, amusing, good-naturedly self-contradicting, hopelessly stuck in pubic mats and lawns of tundra.

PAUL BERMAN

Paul Berman is a writer at the *Village Voice*.

MEDEA IN TOKYO

Already in place, her tears are chainlink gold,
Her grief a silken streamer of "blood" that friends
Draw slowly from her mouth while she is told
A rival has worked her magic. Who's the witch?
The unseen girl will have her hour, then ends
Up on fire. And the star's in fact an old
Man, with clay breasts and trailing robe
Forty pounds of mirror flints enrich,
Who never says a word I comprehend.

What happens when the language is a mask,
And the words we use to hush this up have failed?
The chorus—beekeepers with shamisen—ask
That question (I think) over and over again.
Is tragedy finally wrenched from fairy tale
When we ought to understand but can't pretend?

She doesn't hear a thing. Her dragon cart—
The bucket of a sleek hydraulic lift—
Sways above us all. By now the part
Has worn out her revenge. We're made to feel
Even she is beyond the spell of speech, the gift
Of fate she gave the others. But a moral starts
To echo. The children's screams. And to each wheel
A body's tied with ribbons, pale and stiff.
The words had made no sense, but the sword was real.

J. D. MCCLATCHY

CORRESPONDENCE, *from page 8*

despicable, and I have made no such reference to ACLU-type anythings in a disparaging fashion. I admire the ACLU's defense of free expression very much.

The article's context could give the impression that I opposed Governor Dukakis's position on the Pledge of Allegiance bill, and that I think Democrats should drop our opposition to school prayer and capital punishment. In fact, as a member of the Massachusetts House I voted to uphold Dukakis's veto of the bill, and I was critical of the Bush position in a debate Kuttner moderated during the campaign. I have never suggested weakening our opposition to efforts to use the compulsory school attendance laws to impose religion on young people. And I think capital punishment is a very bad mistake.

I did say that the pursuit of any meaningful federal gun control and liberal opposition to a higher speed limit cost far more politically than they gain in public policy. My reason for urging liberals to drop some issues and lower the priority of others is simple: there are voters prepared to support candidates with liberal positions on anti-discrimination issues, economics, arms reduction, and even on issues of free expression, but who will not support candidates who oppose them on gun control and seem to be harassing them in their personal lives in areas like driving. These are important, complicated issues, and I am pleased Kuttner is discussing them. I just wish he had gotten my part of it more accurate.

BARNEY FRANK
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

THE LOSING LIBERAL

To the editors:

Stephen Holmes's brilliant rebuttal of

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the philosophical attack on liberalism ("The Community Trap," November 28) was itself rebutted by one sentence by Martin Peretz in the same issue ("Why Dukakis Lost"): "The society almost all of us bemoan in one way or another is a society largely made by liberals." The climate of ideas in this country has been dominated for decades by liberal thought and perversions of it. The "doctrine of rights" has been uncritically embraced and expanded to the point where it licenses people to do anything they please. Authority is not merely to be challenged to demonstrate its value to the culture. It is to be defied and subverted as per se a threat to the expression of the individual personality. Here we have the behavioral equivalent of laissez-faire economics, endorsed by the same people who deplore laissez-faire economics as a justification of greed and selfishness. Instead of feeling unappreciated for all that they've done for the country, liberals should begin to take the blame for all that they've done. Otherwise they will find themselves in the position of the vanguard that history left behind.

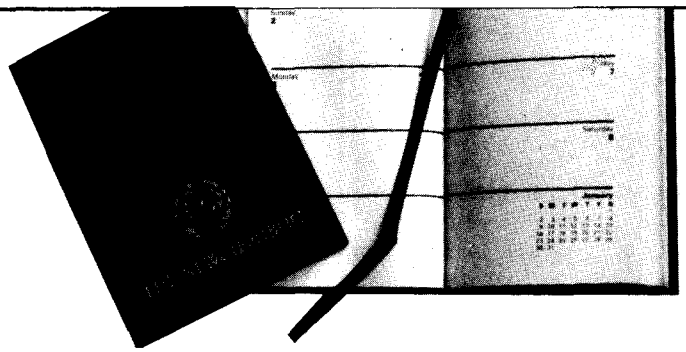
DAVID RANKIN
Torrance, California

To the editors:

First The New Republic endorses Michael Dukakis for president on November 7 ("Dukakis for President"), then Martin Peretz lambastes him. Not only does this volte-face lend new meaning to the old adage "with friends like that you don't need enemies." But invectives like "smug," "imperious," "parochial," "tight little snip," "whining," "murky in the program," "dreary in rhetoric," and "no stranger to the political gutter" leave the reader with the feeling that Peretz "protesteth too much." And for the record, Dukakis was able to name living heroes during the second debate with Bush—ordinary Americans in pursuit of their dreams and aspirations. Or do these kinds of heroes not rank?

ELANA WOLFF
Toronto, Canada

The editors welcome correspondence from readers. Letters should include the writer's full name, address, and telephone number; be typed double-spaced; and be held to under 200 words. Letters may be edited for space. Please address letters to: Correspondence, TNR, 1220 19th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.



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WASHINGTON DIARIST

Buckrakers Anonymous

HAVING BADLY MISREPORTED two of the major stories of 1988—Michael Dukakis's record as governor of Massachusetts and the alleged mental incompetence of Dan Quayle—the press ought to be demonstrating a little humility. Instead, we—or, some of us, anyway—are acting purist, exclusivist, and arrogant again. We like to think of ourselves as selfless guardians of the First Amendment, but actually we behave sometimes like members of a medieval guild, aiming to retain special status for ourselves, impose rigid conformity on our members, and keep competitors out. On December 4, for example, the ombudsman of the *Washington Post*, Richard Harwood, let loose a vituperative attack on a long list of "switch-hitters"—people who were in government and now are in journalism—asserting that "the incessant bed-hopping between the two is doing damage to the image of independence" of the press. Harwood especially attacked Christopher Matthews, former "press agent and propagandist" for Tip O'Neill who is now a columnist and TV commentator, but he cited 22 others by name, including Pat Buchanan, George Will, Bill Moyers, Hodding Carter, Jeane Kirkpatrick, John McLaughlin, and various news executives, calling them "tainted journalists" and implying that their presence somehow threatens journalism. The text for Harwood's column was a speech by David Broder, the *Post*'s ace political reporter/columnist, decrying the development of "a new hybrid creature, an androgynous blending of politician and journalist called The Washington Insider." The press, he said, had "damn well better make it clear that we are not a part of government," for "once we lose our distinctive identity, it will not be long before we lose our freedom."

THE IMPLICATION OF the Harwood-Broder argument—though not stated—is that government officials ought to be banned from the nation's op-ed pages, airwaves, and editorial offices except as occasional guests; that journalists ought never to venture into government and that those who do should not be allowed back. But this is guildish thinking, a restraint of trade in the free market of ideas. What's really important is that the people get the truth, and career news gatherers have no monopoly on it. People who have been in government or politics often have a much richer perspective and appreciation of reality than we who lack the "taint" of experience. The public's understanding of the world would be diminished, not enhanced, without the likes of William Safire, Pat Buchanan, Ken Bode, and Mark Shields, to name a few who have crossed the magic line. Broder and Harwood are right to suggest that some crossers-over may lack professional discipline or integrity and may use their journalistic status to grind special axes, political or personal. It's not a new problem, though. Walter Lippmann and Edward R. Murrow both helped politicians and covered them without telling. It's wrong. But the answer is exposure and open criticism of the conduct involved, not the withholding of press cards to an entire breed who happen not to be "us."

ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF guildism is the decision by the executive committee of the Periodical Press Gallery to forbid members—at the cost of their press cards—to accept fees from the Voice of America or the U.S. Information Agency. The committee also required members to disclose all their sources of earned income (not investments) from industry groups, labor unions, and other potential lobbying organizations, mainly for speeches. The attitude of mind behind these two decisions is that receiving money from the government (whatever for and however little) is inherently corrupting, and so is speaking to private interest groups. There's a further assumption that it's the business of a committee of journalists—elected by their peers but operating under congressional authority—to decide who can and who can't cover the federal government. Membership in one of the congressional press galleries normally is a prerequisite for issuance of a press credential by the White House and other executive departments. Now, the usual fee for the usual half-hour panel discussion on the VOA or USIA is $100, for which sum no one will be "bought" by the federal government. The most anyone could make from such fees is probably $5,000 a year (disclosure: I made maybe $1,200 in 1988), again hardly enough to make the recipient a shill for the government. And in any event, the U.S. government is not an enemy power. Contact with it is not professional treason, and only monumentally self-important people could regard it as such. Clearly it would be unethical for a journalist to engage in lobbying, but making a speech to a group that might lobby does not constitute lobbying and is not unethical. (Disclosure: I do it whenever I can to reputable audiences.) For the congressional galleries to require public disclosure of every speech has nothing to do with ethical policing, which ought to be the responsibility of the news organizations employing reporters. It is an exercise in voyeurism and an invasion of privacy. Its real purpose is to enable busybodies to guesstimate how much someone earned last year and who's hot on the speech circuit. (Disclosure: none of your business.)

THE BIG LAPSES of the media are not in our ethics, anyway, but in our professional performance. Instead of complaining about the allegedly issueless 1988 campaign, the press should have made it issue-full as early as the primaries by exposing the Dukakis record in Massachusetts—the filth in Boston Harbor, the prison furlough program, and the budget mess. Only conservative columnist Warren Brookes really did. Why didn't the rest of us? It could have been liberal bias (we tried pretty hard to uncover Bush's vulnerabilities) or it could have been sloth. Dukakis had an image of competence, and we bought it. Similarly, we bought the image of Quayle as an incompetent featherweight, and then we systematically resold it to the nation. Finally meeting him in the flesh, though, he seems well-informed, intelligent, candid, and engaging—not qualified to be president just yet, but fully capable of growing into the role. The one journalist who got it right about Quayle from the start was Michael Barone of the *Washington Post*, who said he was a late-bloomer who finally settled down to become a serious senator.

WANT TO READ great journalism? Try *Best Laid Plans* by David Martin and John Walcott (Harper & Row), a riveting account of the failure of the Reagan-Bush administration's secret war against terrorism. It's almost entirely based on on-the-record interviews, a book that ought to be winning every prize around. Haven't heard of it? That's one more story we blew in 1988.

MORTON M. KONDRACKE

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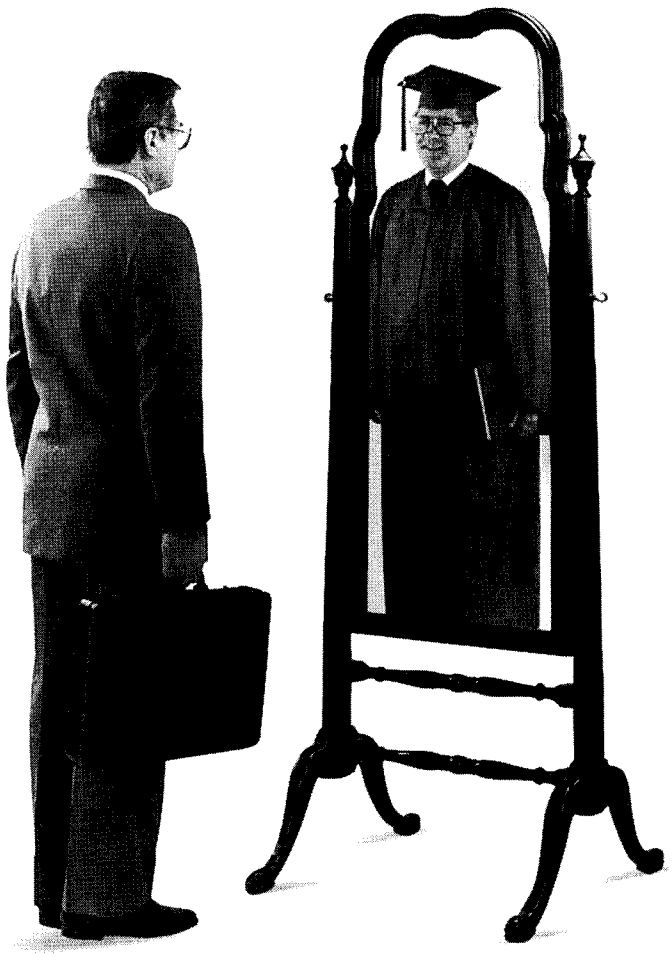

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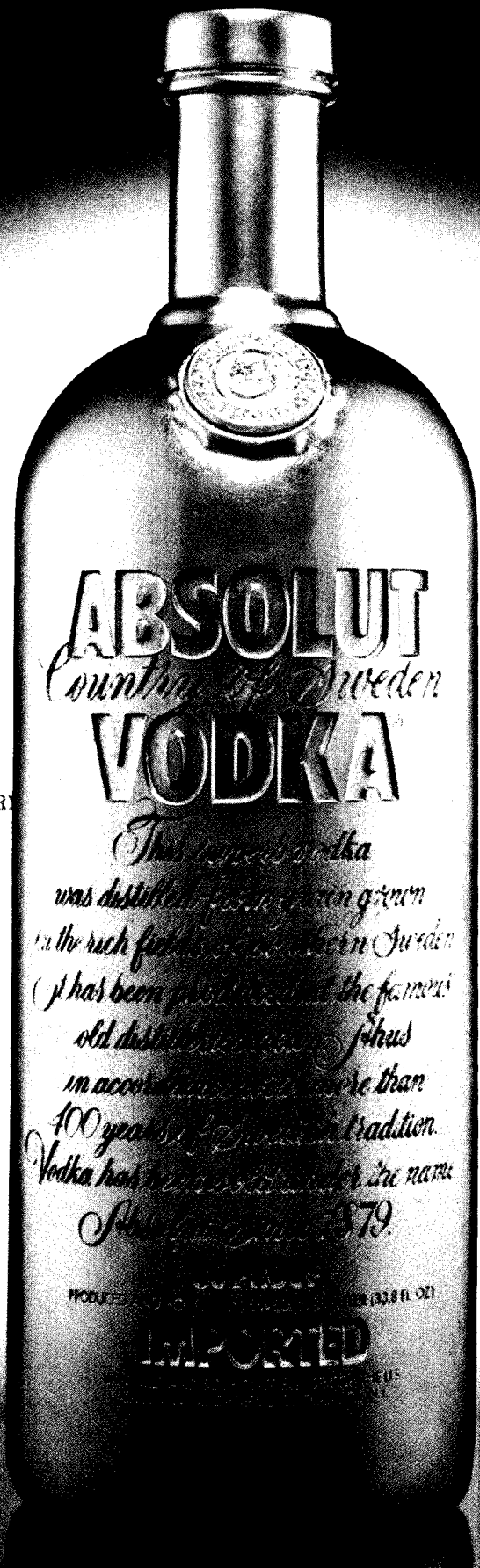

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